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NOVEMBER 2001

Crime à la Carte

Stories by:
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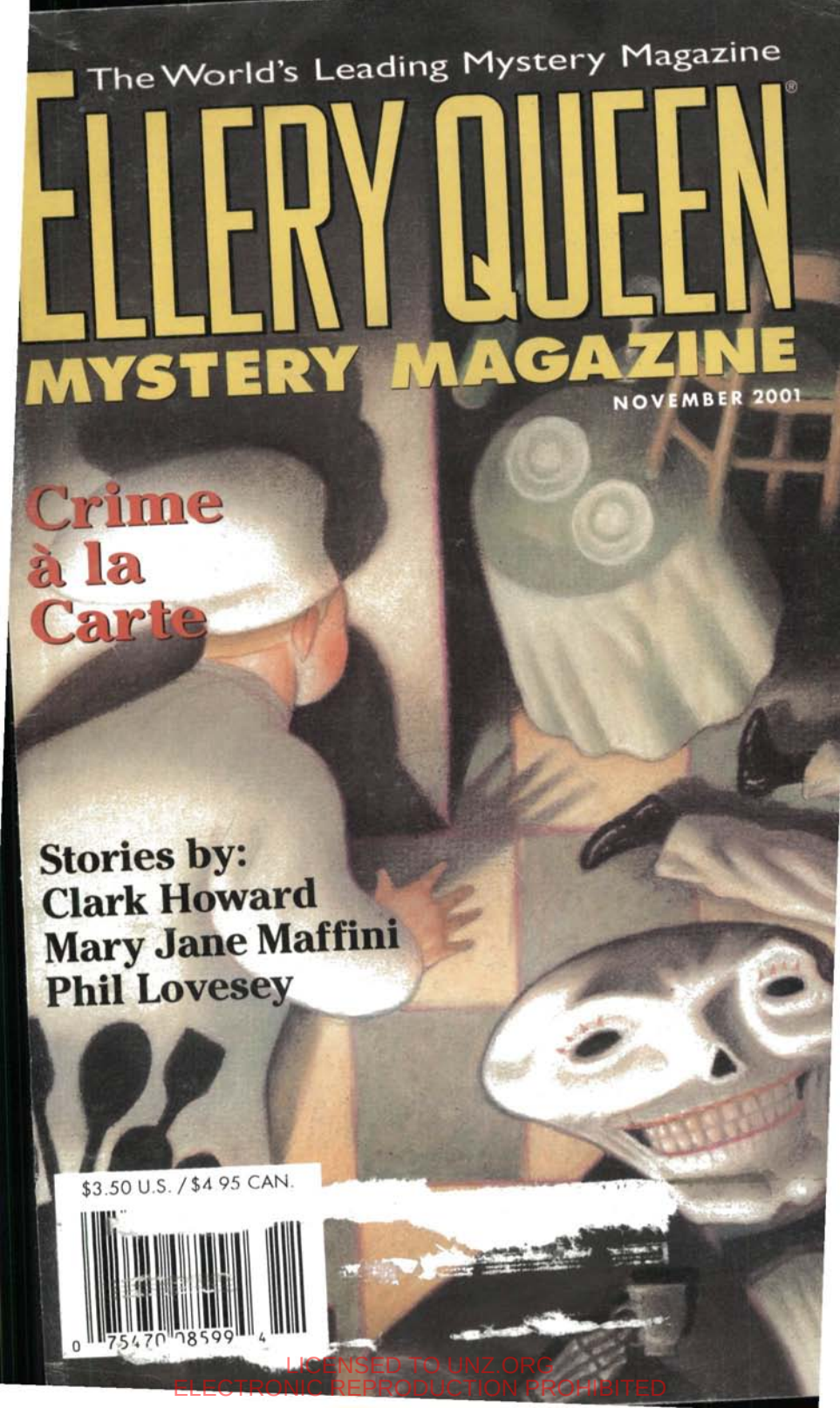
Phil Lovesey



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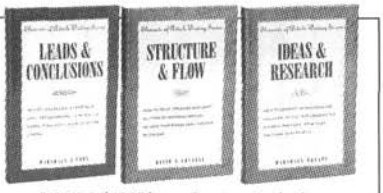

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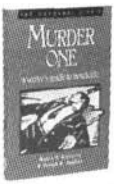

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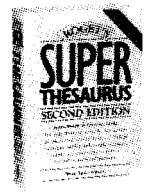

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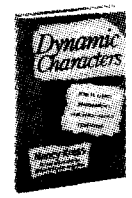

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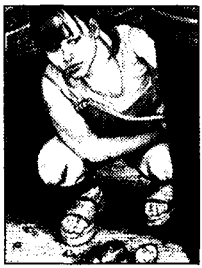
CONTENTS

Nosy neighbor
Page 64



Child's play
Page 100

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Note: indicia on
page 143

FICTION

The California Contact
BY CLARK HOWARD 4

St. John and the Dragon
BY EDWARD D. HOCH 36

The Gift of the Gab
BY DAVID WILLIAMS 50

Groundwork
BY NEIL SCHOFIELD 64

Into the Velvet Night
BY RAYMOND STEIBER 79

Blind Alley
BY MARY JANE MAFFINI 100

One Bad Apple
BY PHIL LOVESEY 108

Ride a Red Dragon
BY MARK COGGINS 120

Second Thought
BY PERCY SPURLARK PARKER 138

REVIEWS

The Jury Box BY JON L. BREEN 33

POETRY

A Forensic Scientist Urges Caution
BY STEPHEN D. ROGERS 63

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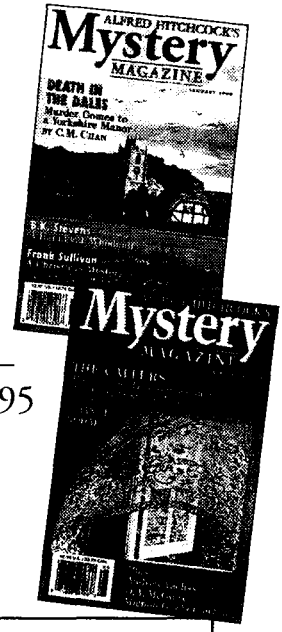

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Art by John Stevens

THE CALIFORNIA CONTACT

by Clark Howard

The man who walked into the Division Street district station was about thirty, conservatively dressed in suit and tie. A uniformed Chicago police sergeant at the front desk looked up at him. "Help you?"

"Yes, my name is Roger Morton," the man said, smiling self-consciously. "I'm not sure exactly who I should see. I think I overheard a murder being planned last night. . . ."

That was how it began.

Roger Morton, an assistant bank auditor, had attempted to telephone his fiancée at the Los Angeles home of her parents, where she was visiting. He had direct-dialed the number from his apartment. Instead of reaching that number, he had somehow been cut into a call between two men, one in Chicago, one in Los Angeles.

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He could hear both ends of their conversation, but when he tried to speak to them, they could not hear him. What Roger heard was this:

"It's all set. He'll be at Disneyland on Friday for sure. Do you think you'll have any problem?"

"No. I'll handle it."

"I don't want any screwups. This is one hit that has to be perfect."

"Don't worry about it. If the weather stays like it's been all week out here, I'll have a nice day for it."

"You're lucky. It's been raining for three days here. Listen, as soon as it's over and you're in the clear, call me so I can let my partner know—"

At that point, Roger's connection had dropped out of the call and he heard a dial tone. That had been at eight-fifteen the previous night. It was the third straight night it had rained in Chicago.

Clark Howard's long stories are classified by some as "novellas" and this year he received a nomination for the only award our genre gives in that category: the Best Novella Derringer Award from the Short Mystery Fiction Society. The honored story is *EQMM* June 2000's "Blood Paths." His latest tale is also lengthy and complex—and just as jam-packed with excitement!

The Chicago Police Department's main headquarters was at Eleventh and State streets. It was a thick, gray, dirty building, as shabby as yesterday's thrown-away newspaper, but as formidable as a twenty-year patrol cop. Gusts of wind whipping around the corner from the nearby lake blew street dirt and litter along the sidewalk in front of it. Through its doors, ignoring the blowing trash, flowed a constant stream of policemen, witnesses, victims, lawyers, and suspects. Eleventh and State was the melting pot of Chicago's dark side.

When Roger Morton entered the building, he was met in the lobby by Lieutenant George Ladd of the Organized Crime Unit.

"Mr. Morton, we appreciate your cooperation in this matter," Ladd said. "There are two things we'd like you to do for us if you would. First, we want to get a stenographer and reconstruct as accurately as possible all of the conversation that you overheard. Second, we want you to listen to some voice tapes we have and see if any of them sound like either of the parties you heard talking. Will you do that for us?"

Roger shrugged. "Sure."

It took them an hour working with Roger and a stenographer to elicit and get down on paper as much of the word-for-word conversation as Roger could recall. It wasn't any more than he had told the district detectives; at least, it didn't seem like it to him. But

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Ladd, who explained to Roger that he was an expert in voice analysis, was interested in every nuance, every inflection of every word, interested even in the pauses between words, the grunts, the pattern of breathing.

"You'd be surprised how unique everyone's voice is," he told Roger after they had finished with the stenographer and were on their way to the audio room to listen to tapes. "Voice patterns may someday be as concretely acceptable for identification as fingerprints. They're already more reliable for detecting lies than a polygraph."

"Fascinating," said Roger. The banking business suddenly seemed very staid and sterile.

The audio room was a network of tape recorders, players, speakers, sound analyzers, modifiers, separators, and a wide variety of other complex and sophisticated equipment. "Have a seat in the audio chair," Ladd said, indicating a cushioned, shell-like leather chair one sat back into, which had delicate, strategically placed speakers in the padding at the top. Roger sat down, liking the chair at once. Ladd selected a reel of tape from a fireproof cabinet and put it on a player.

"This reel contains a series of voices saying various things, most of them unrelated. All of them will sound as if they are speaking over a telephone; some of them, in fact, were; others we have provided with a simulation feature. There are ten-second intervals between each voice. If you recognize any voice, wait until it is finished speaking and then let me know. Okay, here we go."

Presently Roger found himself listening to a hoarse, deep-throated man talking about racehorses. He did not recognize the voice. Next a smoother, more articulate voice spoke briefly about the stock market. Then a flat monotone began talking about sex and the anatomy of a particular woman he'd had it with. Then came a voice speaking in general terms about the federal government.

The next voice had a slight foreign, probably Italian, accent, and was discussing gourmet food. Then a Southern drawl talked about the weather. That was followed by what sounded like a thick African-American voice discoursing on the space program. Then a Midwestern-type voice began describing a musical play he apparently had enjoyed.

"Wait a minute," Roger said. "That sounded like one of them. Can you play that over for me?"

Without a word to interrupt the subject's train of thought, Lieutenant Ladd reversed the reel to the exact place where the voice had begun. Roger listened intently to it a second time.

"That's one of them," he said. "That's the voice at the Chicago end."

"Okay," said Ladd. "Now let me put another tape on and have you listen to it."

They went through the same routine again: a variety of voices

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saying a variety of things; some briefly interesting, some dull, some ridiculous, some obscene, some foreign-sounding. Then Roger again heard the voice he had identified on the first tape. It said something different this time—but it was the same voice.

"That's it. That's him," Roger said, an edge of excitement in his own voice.

They went through a third tape, this one containing voice impressions of the earlier voices Roger had listened to. Mixed in with those impersonations were the actual voices again, saying still different things, their voices broken up and separated by strange sounds, unusual noises, to distort Roger's hearing process. There was even some brief, obscene language together with heavy breathing, obviously a woman's, to interrupt his concentration.

But when it was all over, he had picked the same voice a third and a fourth time.

Later that day, Lieutenant Ladd met with the chief of detectives, the deputy chief in charge of the Organized Crime section, and his own captain. The captain's name was Dunleavy.

"Any doubt at all about it?" Dunleavy asked Ladd.

"Not in my opinion, Captain," the voice expert said unequivocally. "In three separate tests, he accurately picked out the voice of Gino Cabrisi four times."

The chief of detectives, whose name was Pittman, lighted a long brown cigar and looked at his deputy, Dennis Fraser, who headed up the Organized Crime unit. "What's the sheet on Cabrisi, Denny?" he asked, blowing smoke toward the ceiling.

"He's the number-two man in the Midwest combination," Fraser said. "Has personal charge of the Kansas City-Milwaukee-Evansville triangle, as well as all downstate Illinois operations. He's a third-generation Italian-American, Chicago-born, fifty-one years old, married, has a son at Yale, another one at West Point. No police record since the early seventies. Answers directly to Frank Marello, who controls syndicate business in the seven-state area of Wisconsin, Iowa, Missouri, Kansas, Illinois, Indiana, and Michigan. Want more?"

Chief Pittman shook his head and drew in thoughtfully on his cigar. "A man like that, with a son at West Point, a son at Yale, might be pretty vulnerable with a murder-conspiracy charge staring him in the face. So vulnerable, in fact, that he might be willing to trade information for anonymity. We might be able to take down some pretty big fish if we can get some West Coast help on this. But it would have to be very *good* help." He looked at Dunleavy. "Who's our California contact on organized crime matters?"

"Fellow named Ramm," said the captain. "Charley Ramm. He's a special agent of the California Bureau of Investigation, out of their L. A. office."

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"Charley Ramm," the chief mused, frowning slightly. "Sounds familiar. Do I know him from anywhere?"

"Probably not, Chief," said Dunleavy. "You may remember the name from about fifteen years ago. He used to be a fighter. Light-heavyweight. They called him 'Battering' Ramm."

"What happened to him?"

Dunleavy shrugged. "Same thing that happened to a lot of young light-heavyweights back then. He met up with Evander Holyfield and got slaughtered. The Real Deal took him out in the seventh."

"So he quit and became a cop?"

"Right. But there's a story behind it. He had one more fight after the Holyfield go: a ten-rounder with a Hispanic kid named Chula Valdes that the L. A. mob was building up. They offered Ramm a hundred grand to let Chula take him out in the third—in half the time it took Holyfield to do it. That way Chula would look better to the public than Holyfield, and they could build up a big title elimination match between Holyfield and their man. Well, Ramm took the money, went to Vegas, and bet the whole hundred thousand on *himself.* Then he ripped Chula up in one round. After collecting his winnings, he sent the hundred-grand bribe *back* to the mob and went out that same day and joined the Los Angeles Police Department. It was a smart move. Ramm knew the mob wouldn't think twice about putting a hit on a double-crossing fighter, but they'd be very reluctant to kill a rookie cop. And he was right. It pissed them off royally to do it, but they left him alone."

"And he stayed a cop?" the chief asked.

Dunleavy nodded. "Yes, sir. And turned out to be a damned good one, too. Went to night school and got degrees in Criminal Justice and Law Enforcement. In five years he was a detective; in seven a detective sergeant."

"How'd he get with the CBI?"

"The California attorney general's office launched a big investigation into the fight game throughout the state. They asked all the police agencies to loan them any personnel who were familiar with the fight mob. LAPD sent them Charley Ramm. He worked as part of the CBI strike force that ran the syndicate out of professional boxing. When it was all over, CBI asked him if he'd like to stay on permanently. He did. Eventually they made him the Bureau's liaison for all interstate cases involving the mob in California."

"You've worked with him before?" the chief asked.

"Yes, sir. Several times."

"He's a good man?"

"The best, Chief."

The chief paused, pursing his lips, tapping one finger, hesitating just long enough to give the other men in the office the impression that he still had a touch of reservation about the whole thing, and

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that he was relying on them to do an extra good job in order to reaffirm his faith in them. But finally he said, "All right, bring your California contact in on it. Let's see how much syndicate garbage we can haul on this one. Get moving."

Charley Ramm, the California contact, left his CBI office in the downtown Los Angeles civic center and drove out to East L.A. to see his friend Chula Valdes at the Dos Amigos Gym. Chula was the fighter that Charley had knocked out in a single round after agreeing to throw the fight for the mob. Betting his bribe money at fifteen to one on a first-round knockout, he had come away with a million and a half dollars. Most of it was now in FDIC-insured certificates of deposit in various banks, paying Charlie more than enough monthly interest to maintain a Newport Beach condo facing the ocean, and to enjoy a much more upscale lifestyle than your average state cop.

Within a year after Charley had annihilated Chula Valdes in their ESPN main event, Chula had lost two more fights and his career had gone down the tubes. It was then that Charley, who had a hardcore love of boxing, approached Chula and agreed to advance a hundred thousand dollars for Chula to set up the Dos Amigos—Two Friends—Gym. The enterprise had prospered over the years, and the two men had produced several top-rated, popular fighters. They had not, however, come up with a world champion, which was something they greatly desired. In fact, both of them dreamed—literally *dreamed* at night—of having a champion. Some Hispanic or Black kid from East L.A. or Watts that they could pick up, train, groom, and bring along slowly all the way to a title fight. Lightweight, welterweight, middleweight—they didn't care. Just as long as they could nurture and foster a *champion.*

When Charley got to the gym, he found Chula watching a young white fighter spar with one of the Hispanic amateurs they let train there. "Where'd the gringo kid come from?" he asked.

"Trailer trash," said Chula. "Heard about the gym in Preston. Hitchhiked down when he got out."

Preston was the state reformatory. "How's he look?" Charley asked anxiously. A *white* champion would really be a coup. But Chula shook his head.

"A bleeder. That mayonnaise skin of his is too thin. He's got two nicks already. What are you doing here this time of day?"

"On my way to Disneyland." Charley held up a hand. "Don't even ask, man."

Charley had received by fax the previous afternoon a brief overview of a Chicago P.D. investigation regarding a possible mob hit being set up. At Disneyland, of all places. Lieutenant George Ladd, from the Chicago department, was flying into LAX early that

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evening and Charley was to coordinate a local investigation with him. Meanwhile, he was going to lay some groundwork of his own.

The two men stood watching the workout. Chula's face was scarred with proud flesh from beatings he had taken. Charley Ramm's own countenance, except for a hooked nose broken twice, was comparatively unmarked. In addition to being a lethal puncher, Charley had also been a slick boxer. Chula had been neither, and looked it.

"How'd the talk go with Marian the other night?" Chula asked.

"Lousy," said Charley. "But we spent the night together."

Chula grimaced. "How could it be lousy if she let you spend the night with her?"

"Spending the night with her was great. It was the talk that was lousy. She thinks reconciliation is a dirty word."

Charley had been married at one time to Marian Barlow, a Pasadena high school teacher. Marian was everything Charley was not: upper middle-class background, educated, smart dresser, marvelous conversationalist. Their romance had been strictly a case of opposites attracting. They met when she chaperoned at a state government day for students. It was lust at first sight. Two weeks later they drove to Las Vegas and got married in a tacky little wedding chapel with strangers for witnesses. A year later, Marian divorced him.

"You don't need a wife, Charley," she told him at the time. "You need a cook and a call girl. I've been keeping a record. In your average twenty-four-hour day, you spend six hours sleeping, twelve hours chasing bad guys, four hours at that gym fantasizing about finding a boxing champion, and two hours with me. Those two hours with me consist of one hour eating dinner, and one hour of either sex or television, depending on how tired we are. Best thing would be for you to eat out, hire a call girl, and watch TV alone. I've had it with this so-called marriage."

She moved out. Charley had been begging her to give him another chance. She frequently let him come over and spend the night, but adamantly refused to consider remarriage.

"Where's Luis?" Charley asked, looking around for their latest hot prospect, Luis Munoz, a southpaw welter.

"I got him over in the park doing some roadwork," said Chula.

"How's he looking?"

"Ask me later, man. I have to think about it."

Charley left the gym, hoping that Luis Munoz would be the one. He visualized himself working the corner of a welterweight champion of the world.

Charley drove down to the vast Disneyland amusement park in Anaheim and located Ralph Franklin, its chief of security. He

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briefed Franklin on the investigation and asked for his input on how to handle a tactical surveillance at the park if it came down to that. Franklin shook his head.

"Charley, unless you come up with some kind of personal ID of the target or the shooter, we haven't got a prayer of conducting a successful surveillance. This park covers more than four thousand acres; that's six square *miles.* This time of year, we get a minimum of twenty thousand people a day going in and out—"

"Classify your average visitors for me, Ralph," said Charley.

Franklin ticked them off on his fingers. "One: father, mother, children between six and ten. Two: grandparents and older children between nine and twelve. Three: teenagers, in groups, usually segregated with boys together, girls together. Next: teenagers on dates, usually in groups of four or six. Then: servicemen, usually Marines from Camp Pendleton or sailors up from San Diego, usually in pairs or trios, in uniform, trying to pick up girls. That's about it. Everybody else comes under miscellaneous."

"What about single guys," Charley asked, "alone?"

"We don't get many of those," Franklin admitted. "Hardly anybody visits Disneyland alone."

"A hit man probably would," said Charley. "Would it be possible to put a tail on every male that enters the park alone on a given day?"

"Probably. I could have our entrance security observers radio a description of all unaccompanied males to plainclothes security people in Town Square and along Main Street, U.S.A. Everybody that comes through the front gates has to go across the square and down that street to the Plaza, which branches off to the various sections of the park: Tomorrowland, Fantasyland, Frontierland, and Adventureland. The only other way into the park is the Monorail that runs from the Disneyland Hotel outside the park to Tomorrowland inside the park. Security observers could watch the Monorail station and the Plaza, and radio in to whichever section he enters."

"Okay, I think you'd better get ready to put a plan like that into operation," Charley advised him. "On very short notice, too. I don't have a timeline on this thing yet, but I probably will have later today when a Chicago Police Department officer gets here. I'll be back in touch as soon as I can."

Ralph Franklin shook his head. "What kind of psycho would pick a place like Disneyland for a hit?"

"A smart one," Charley told him.

From Disneyland, Charley drove to Hollywood Park racetrack and went in through the employee entrance. The racing day had already begun, the horses moving from the paddock toward the starting gate for the third race. In the clubhouse section, Charley made his way down to a private box belonging to a smallish, bald-

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ing man named Casper Dale, who was sitting with his much younger girlfriend.

"Who do you like in the third, Casper?" asked Charley. Dale looked up.

"Saratoga Sweetie, number seventeen. Take a seat, Charley."

Charley stepped into the box and sat down. Dale handed his girlfriend five one-hundred-dollar bills and told her to go place the bet. Charley gave her a fifty of his own to bet; Casper Dale usually knew what he was doing. He was the owner of three card houses in nearby Gardena, where draw poker was legal, the city council having declared by statute that it was a game of skill rather than a game of chance, therefore not gambling per se. Though Dale was not considered an actual mobster, he did pay protection money, and his business kept him close enough to the mob to be privy to insider information. A number of years earlier, Charley Ramm had helped Dale's teenage son get into a treatment program for his heroin addiction instead of going to jail, and Dale was obligated to him for it.

"What's on your mind, Charley?" Dale asked pointedly when they were alone. Charley leaned closer to him.

"There's word out about a mob hit scheduled very soon. You heard anything?"

Dale shook his head, perhaps a little too quickly. "Not a thing."

"You know of any big debtors that someone might want to make an example of?"

The gambler shook his head again. "No."

"Any of the boys been ripped off by anyone lately?"

Another shake of the head.

Charley pursed his lips in thought for a moment, trying to decide if Casper Dale was leveling with him. "How's Eddie doing?" he asked. Eddie was Dale's son.

Dale's expression clouded. "You don't have to remind me that I owe you, Charley. If you were really interested in Eddie, you would have asked about him before you asked about the hit."

Charley looked away, embarrassed. Dale's words had stung. He watched the horses moving into the starting gate for the third race. Saratoga Sweetie looked feisty. Charley turned back to Casper Dale.

"You're right, Casper. I'm sorry."

"Don't let your job make a bastard out of you, Charley."

There was a loud bell, the starting-gate doors flung open, the horses bolted forward, and over the public address system a voice announced, "They're off and running in the third race—!"

Dale's girlfriend returned with their betting slips and the three of them watched the six-furlong race. Saratoga Sweetie ran second.

"We both lose, Charley," Casper Dale said. "Sorry I couldn't give you a winner today."

"You tried, Casper." Charley held out his hand. "No hard feelings?"

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"Not this time."

They shook hands and Charley left.

Early that evening, Charley stood in an arrival terminal at LAX and watched as passengers filed off a jet from Chicago. He picked out Lieutenant George Ladd as soon as their sweeping glances met. Cops always recognize other cops. They introduced themselves and went into a concourse cocktail lounge to have a drink. Ladd gave Charley a personal rundown on the case, beginning with Roger Morton walking into the district station to report the conversation he had overheard. Charley shook his head in wonderment.

"Incredible. I know that telephone calls occasionally are cross-connected like that, but to pick up a conversation where a hit is being planned . . ."

Ladd nodded. "Our communications people conferred with the telephone company operations personnel and were told that approximately one in three hundred thousand direct-dialed toll calls might be erroneously cross-connected in the main switching terminal, but most of the time their scrutiny software detects it immediately and corrects it before a third party actually hears any of the conversation already in progress. Only about one out of a thousand of the one out of three hundred thousand *doesn't* get corrected."

"What does that come down to?" Charley asked

"Two chances in three hundred million calls."

"And out of those two, for the person who got cross-connected to pick up a *mob* conversation, with a hit being planned—incredible. Whoever the target is, somebody up above is sure looking out for him."

"Must be," Ladd agreed. "Because here we sit, trying to figure a way to help somebody we don't even know." The Chicago officer tilted his head slightly. "You have local tactical command of the operation. Any plans yet?"

"Not many," Charley admitted. "Disneyland security has been alerted and a tentative surveillance plan is being worked up. Right now our main problem is to come up with some kind of lead to the ID of the players involved. Were you able to determine any kind of timeline from your information on the conversation that was overheard?"

"Yeah. You aren't going to like it."

"Tell me anyway."

"It'll be Friday."

Charley's mouth dropped open. *"Tomorrow!"*

"Tomorrow," Ladd confirmed. Charley sat back in the booth and stared numbly at his drink. Tomorrow. If true, it was going to be impossible to stop—unless he had a name or a face: the hit man's, the target's, the connection in California who set it up, the mob

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boss who approved it, an informant who knew about it—*somebody.*

"There's one long shot I can take that might work," he said quietly, as much to himself as to Ladd. "But I need to think it out. Meantime," he told Ladd, "I'd like you to come back to the CBI office and start going through mug-shot books. We have a pretty comprehensive record of hoods who have moved into the L.A. area from Chicago and other places back east. You might recognize a face that you can tie in to that guy Cabrisi whose voice your people were able to ID on the phone call. Who knows, we might get lucky."

"Let's get started then," agreed Ladd.

At the CBI offices, while Ladd scrutinized mug-shot books, Charley got Ralph Franklin on the phone and told him that the hit at Disneyland could possibly be going down the next day. Franklin was as taken aback as Charley had been when Ladd told him, but agreed to assemble the necessary personnel on his security staff and get the park surveillance plan operational before the park opened the following morning. Charley advised him that he and Ladd would be there with a CBI team two hours before opening time.

Charley then briefed his own boss and they pulled up a computer list of CBI agents available at once for special duty. Calls went out to them immediately. The first of those agents to arrive was Rick Larch, a young ex-Navy Seal. Charley put him in charge of the next three agents who would show up, to form a night surveillance team, with two vehicles, in near proximity to an address in Beverly Hills that he gave to Larch. Then Charley left the CBI offices alone.

He had been mulling over the long shot he had thought of earlier, and decided to do it. He knew it was risky; so was everything else in his life. But this, he concluded, was worse; it was *extra* risky. In his unmarked car, on the way to Beverly Hills, an unfamiliar anxiety began to surface in his emotions. Suddenly he had the urge to talk to Marian. On impulse he called her on his mobile phone.

"Hello—" As usual, Charley thought her voice sounded like caramel syrup would sound if it could make noise.

"Hey, it's me—"

"Charley, if you mention reconciliation," she warned, "I'll hang up and disconnect the phone."

"I won't, I promise," he said urgently. "Please don't hang up."

Marian sensed something in his voice that she was not accustomed to. "Charley, where are you? Are you all right?"

"Sure, I'm fine. Just on my way out to Beverly Hills to see a guy."

"You sound—stressed, or something."

"Just a little tired. Been a long day. Listen, I'm sorry about spoiling the other night. It was a great evening. It's just that sometimes it's so great being with you that I can't resist talking

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about—well, you know."

"You're going to *have* to resist it, Charley," Marian said firmly. "My mind is made up. Look, we'll always be close friends, Charley. We can even go on being occasional lovers. We just can't be married."

"I know, I know. I guess I'm just afraid some other guy will come along and all that will change. Then I wouldn't have anything."

"Sure you would. You'd have your job. Chula and the gym. Your dream of managing a champion boxer someday. You'd have a lot, Charley." There was an uneasy pause. Then Marian said, "Listen, it's been a long day for me, too. I need to turn in early. Call me tomorrow night, okay?"

"Sure, honey."

If I'm still alive, he thought as they hung up.

Twenty minutes later, Charley pulled up to the gate of an elegant but not opulent mansion set back on high-walled acreage in an exclusive area. He rang an intercom outside the gate. A voice said, "Yes?"

"I'm here to see Mr. Weiskoff. Tell him it's Bat Ramm. I used to be a fighter. I think he'll remember me."

In fact, I know *he'll remember me,* Charley thought as he waited. Solomon Weiskoff, known as "King" Solomon, was the longtime head of crime syndicate operations in California, Oregon, Washington, and Arizona. It was he who had arranged the fix in Charley's fight with Chula Valdes fifteen years earlier.

After several minutes, the gate opened and one of the King's bodyguards got in the car with Charley and instructed him to proceed along the three-hundred-yard drive back to the mansion itself. At the door, he handed over his Glock automatic and had his body scanned for other weapons with an electronic, hand-held metal detector. Then he was escorted into a richly appointed study where the King sat with his number-two man, a polished, modern-day, business executive type of criminal named Jack Turban. Weiskoff himself looked like a tired old hardware-store salesman. There was a hint of weary amusement in his eyes when he looked at Charley.

"You have any idea how much money you cost me on that Valdes fight?" he asked. After so many years, the question was more rhetorical than anything else. Charley shrugged.

"A bundle, I guess."

"You guess right. Ten, twelve years ago, if you'd walked in here like this, cop or no cop, you wouldn't have walked back out." Then the King himself shrugged as Charley had, and waved absently with one hand. "But that amount is chump change today, what with inflation, taxes, the cost of living. And time, like somebody said, is a great healer." He smiled wryly. "Heals everything but old age, you understand." He gestured for Charley to sit down. "So what is it you want, Battering Ramm?"

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"To do you a favor, maybe," said Charley. "There's a mob contract hit scheduled for tomorrow in your territory, and I have a feeling that you don't know anything about it."

The King's eyes narrowed the tiniest fraction—but enough for Charley, who was primed for a reaction, to catch it. And know he was right.

"You have my attention," the King said.

From his pocket, Charley took a cassette tape that he had been given by Lieutenant Ladd and put it on the coffee table. "The voice on this tape has been identified as the same voice heard on a long distance telephone call a few days ago talking to somebody in L. A. to confirm a hit for sometime tomorrow at Disneyland. The voice belongs to Gino Cabrisi, Frank Marello's number-two man in the Midwest. I don't know who he was talking to; I just know it wasn't you, because you wouldn't deal with him, you'd deal directly with Marello because the two of you have equal standing. That's why I don't think you know anything about the hit. Marello might not either."

The King looked over at Jack Turban, giving him permission to speak. "What's your interest in all this, Ramm?" Turban asked.

"I'm CBI liaison to the Chicago police, who picked up information on the call. Basically what I'm trying to do is prevent another California murder."

Turban was about to say something else, but the King held up a hand to silence him. He smiled at Charley. "As taxpayers, we appreciate your diligent devotion to law and order, Agent Ramm. But we are legitimate businessmen and have nothing to do with criminals and murder. I'm afraid we can't help you. But thank you for dropping in."

In less than five minutes, Charley was shown out, his gun returned, and he was accompanied by an escort car until he was beyond the gate and it had closed behind him.

He drove a block, pulled over, and contacted Rick Larch by radio. Larch and the other three members of the night surveillance team were set up on a wooded lot opposite Weiskoff's gate. They had night vision scopes in place and two undercover vehicles parked nearby for tailing.

"Okay," Charley told them, "I want to know everyone who goes in or comes out of that house for the rest of the night. The King will be conducting some serious business, and he *won't* want to do it over the phone. I want a report on my voice mail by six o'clock in the morning."

"You'll have it," Rick Larch said.

Back at King Solomon's mansion, the old mobster turned to look intently at Jack Turban. They had just finished listening to the

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cassette tape that Charley Ramm had left.

"So, Jacob, what's going on?" he asked.

"I don't know, Sol," his number-two man said. Turban was also Solomon Weiskoff's nephew, the son of his favorite older sister, who had married a General Motors master mechanic named Nathan Turbansky. They had five sons, all of them good boys except the middle one, Jacob. King Solomon had taken Jacob into the rackets to get him away from the rest of the Turbansky family, which was thoroughly respectable and untainted. To keep it that way, Solomon had instructed Jacob Turbansky to change his name to Jack Turban. It was only when Sol was agitated or suspicious about something that he reverted to addressing Turban as Jacob.

"You know this Cabrisi guy, Jacob," the older man said. "You're both on the same level in the national structure of the organization. What do you suppose he's up to?"

"Maybe the whole thing is just some kind of cop setup," Turban suggested. King Solomon grimaced.

"Jacob," he chided, "I'm going to forget you said that." Pondering, he walked about the room. "Why in the name of reason would anyone pick Disneyland for a hit?"

"Maybe that's the only place the target will be," Turban said.

"No," his uncle replied thoughtfully. "A target can always be followed to another place. If it's set in Disneyland, there's a reason for it." Returning to his chair, he rubbed a forefinger along one side of a very crooked nose that had been smashed by a lead pipe decades earlier when he had been a young strongarm thug just starting in the mob. "Jacob, remember about seven years ago when those two young punks from the Valley knocked us off for eight hundred grand in the Denver airport? Eight thousand C-notes in a piece of carry-on luggage. It represented eighty percent of a million in dirty money that we had sent to Frank Marello to be laundered by his Chicago banking connections for a twenty percent fee. Marello's courier brought the clean money to Denver; our courier was supposed to pick it up there. The two young punks pepper-sprayed them in a men's room, used plastic handcuffs to cuff them to a toilet stall, and were out of the terminal before anybody could notify airport security." Sol feigned a lapse of memory. "What were the names of those two punks again?"

"Irish Johnny Flynn and Joey Dancer," said Turban.

Didn't even have to think about it, did you, Jacob? the King thought. "As I recall, Dancer got away clean, but our people caught up with Irish Johnny in a Redondo Beach apartment when he went back to get his wife. They blew him away with silencers when he tried to pull a gun. His wife was pregnant, but fortunately she was at the doctor's office at the time and didn't witness it. Our boys searched the apartment from top to bottom but didn't

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turn up any part of the money. The only unusual thing they found was in Irish Johnny's pocket: a used all-day pass to Disneyland, dated that same day. Which means what, Jacob?"

"That he was in the park earlier that day," Turban replied.

"Exactly. Nobody's ever found the money, and nobody's ever found Dancer, even though we had people in every part of the country looking for him for two solid years." King Solomon leaned forward and fixed Jack Turban in a level stare. "You don't personally know anything about what's going on here, do you, Jacob?"

"No, Uncle," Turban disclaimed. "Of course not. I'd tell you if I did."

"Yes," the old mobster nodded, "of course you would." He sat back. "All right, here's what you do. Contact the Leper. Have him come over here right away, tonight. Then go down to the office and bring me the file we have on Joey Dancer. The one with the pictures in it. Go."

Jack Turban left the room.

Charley Ramm went back to the CBI office. George Ladd had finished going over the mug-shot books, with no success. Charley spent two hours putting together a CBI team of six agents and briefing them on what was expected the next day at Disneyland. The agent he put in charge of the team was Casey Clay, a young black man who had been a Marine Corps inter-service heavyweight boxing champion. Charley was constantly on him to change his name to Casey Ali and turn pro so that he and Chula Valdes could manage him. But Casey always spurned their offer. "I don't like getting punched in the face, Charley," was his stoic reply every time Charley brought up the subject.

When Charley had his team ready, he sent George Ladd with them to check into the Disneyland Hotel so they could be on the scene for the surveillance operation the next morning. Satisfied that he had everything covered, Charley left the CBI offices to go home.

It took him an hour to drive down to Newport Beach. His condominium apartment building was built over a tenant parking garage. Pulling into his private parking space, he suddenly realized that he was very tired, very stressed. Forlornly, he wished with all his being that Marian would be waiting for him upstairs, as she had been so many nights when they'd been married. How great it would be to sit out on the balcony drinking mugs of hot chocolate with her, listening to the surf, feeling the cool night air begin to chill them, then hurrying inside to get into bed and warm up, make love, and fall asleep in each other's arms.

That was what Charley was fancying in his mind as he walked toward the garage elevator. He was as unalert as a schoolboy in church, did not even notice the figure come up from behind him and drive a brass-knuckled fist against his temple. Charley

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pitched sideways, where he was hit in the face by a blow from a second man on the other side of him. Blood gushed from his nose. Ex-boxer's instincts rising, he stepped inside the next punch, which he knew would be coming from the first man, and swung blindly, feeling a painful satisfaction as his fist impacted jawbone. At the same time, he twisted and kicked up with one foot, hoping to find the groin of the second man. But the kick missed and, off balance now, he took two more hard punches to the face. Then the blows rained from both directions, to the stomach, rib cage, kidneys. In less than a minute, he was in a heap on the concrete floor. A hand snatched his Glock automatic from its holster and slid it under a parked car. From the indistinct murkiness surrounding his head, he heard a voice growl, "Stay out of Disneyland, cop, or you're gonna end up in Forest Lawn." The threat was followed by a vicious kick to Charley's right ankle.

Covering his head and face with both arms, Charley listened to their footsteps hurry up the stairs to ground level. For a moment he pictured the pastoral serenity of Forest Lawn, a cemetery, and wished he were lying on the soft green grass next to some cool marble headstone. But eventually his pain pulled him back to reality and, raising his head, he saw that he could again focus. Working himself into a kneeling position, he crawled over to the parked car to retrieve his gun. Then, using the car for support, he pulled himself upright and leaned his head forward to rest and steady himself. Blood from his nose streaked down the driver's-side window, making him wonder briefly what the car's owner would think when he came down to go to work the next morning.

In the elevator, Charley left a little blood on the floor, but took off his coat and held it bundled to his face so as not to drip on the carpet in the hall upstairs. Once in his apartment, he went directly to the shower, painfully stripped out of his clothes, and stood under the cold water for ten full minutes. The nosebleed stopped. Getting out, he put on a thick terry-cloth robe, swallowed two codeine tablets, took a couple of face towels, and went into the kitchen for a bucket of ice. With that, a glass, and a bottle of Tanqueray, he went onto his balcony and sat on a chaise longue. While he drank the gin, he used the towels to make ice compresses which he rotated from ankle to face and points in between. The cool ocean air felt good. The codeine began to work. The gin made friends with the codeine.

It was Jack Turban who ordered his beating, he was sure of it. King Solomon would not have done it so quickly and so obviously. It had to have been Turban. He was the only other person who knew Charley was aware of the planned hit.

I'll get the son of a bitch for this, Charley promised himself as he began to go into an ice-drug-alcohol haze. At some point, he went

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inside and crawled into bed. He went to sleep pretending a pillow he was holding against him was Marian.

At six o'clock the next morning, Charley Ramm's automated wake-up call rang him out of his drugged sleep. When he moved to shut the call off, pain shot through his body. Groaning softly, he pulled the phone onto the bed and pushed a double digit to ring his voice mail. There were three messages. The first was from Marian: "Hi, Charley. Listen, I'm sorry if I cut you short last night. Maybe we can get together this weekend and just try to enjoy each other without any heavy commitments. Let's talk about it later, okay? 'Bye." Good, Charley thought. It sounded like she might be coming around.

The next message was from Chula: "Hey, bro, listen, I don't wanna ruin your day or nothing, but I've decided this kid Luis Munoz ain't going no place with us, man. I've had him doing road-work in the park every day an' he's always coming back huffing and puffing like a three-pack-a-day smoker. No stamina at all, you know, man? I think he might even have asthma. So keep your eye out for somebody new, okay? Later, man." Damn, Charley thought. He'd practically had the kid winning the welterweight title.

The last message was from Rick Larch on the night surveillance team. "Reporting in, Charley. Five movements at King Sol's place overnight. Jack Turban left about half an hour after you did. Went to a mob-owned real estate office down on Sepulveda. Was inside for about ten minutes, then came out with a file of some kind and returned to the King's place. An hour after he got back, the Leper turned up. He was in the place for about an hour. Then the Leper left and went to his apartment in Santa Monica. Twenty minutes later, Turban left and drove to his home in Bel Air. That was it. Call me if you need me."

Charley sat on the side of the bed, feeling much as he had after the Holyfield fight. For several minutes he carefully massaged some of the stiffness out of his body, and thought about the Leper. No one knew who he really was; he could not be identified by fingerprinting because all of his prints and parts of several fingers had been eaten away by leprosy. A man of about fifty, his disease was in remission, and he had enough finger flexibility left to be an excellent pistol shot. He was believed to have killed at least eleven men for Solomon Weiskoff over the years, but had never been arrested. He used several names and ostensibly lived off the proceeds of an annuity that had been established for him, so even federal tax people couldn't get to him.

What, Charley wondered, had King Solomon learned after Charley left last night that was so important he was throwing the Leper into the mix? Maybe he'd find out, he decided, in a few hours when Disneyland opened for the day. Dragging himself into

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the kitchen, he made some strong black coffee to help him shave without hacking himself to death.

By eight o'clock, Charley was driving through the security gate at the Magic Kingdom. In Ralph Franklin's office, he found Franklin, Lieutenant George Ladd, and Casey Clay from the CBI team. All were wearing casual sport clothes—jeans, shorts, loose shirts—to conceal weapons and radios. Also present were a dozen members of Franklin's security force, similarly dressed to blend in with the crowd. Six key contact officers were code-named Main Street One, Plaza One, Tomorrowland One, Adventureland One, Fantasyland One, and Frontierland One. Each of them was dressed in a costume in keeping with the theme of their area: Main Street One was an 1890s policeman; Tomorrowland One was an astronaut; Fantasyland One was Robin Hood; Frontierland One was Daniel Boone; Adventureland One was a jungle trader in safari garb; and Plaza One was a park cleanup man with a broom, caddy, and trash barrel on wheels. Special teams of male and female security personnel in street clothes with a touristy look were also assembled.

As Charley briefed everyone on the scant information that he had, fax photographs of the Leper were coming in from CBI headquarters and being distributed to everyone by Franklin. "This man is the only link we have to anyone right now," Charley told the group, "and we don't even know that he'll actually show today—but I *think* he will. Why he'll be here, or who he's after, I can't tell you. But he is a *link*—and right now he's the only one we have. Aside from him, we'll be on any males who come in alone. We can only hope that our scrutiny and alertness will enable us to pick up on whatever's been planned and prevent it from happening. Good luck."

Franklin patted Charley on the back. "I hope our luck is better than yours was last night." He alluded to Charley's bruised and cut face.

"So do I," Charley said.

"Okay, let's get out there and in place," Franklin ordered. "Park opens in twenty minutes."

As Charley had hoped, the Leper was one of the first people to enter the park when it opened. An undistinguished little man, he walked with a slight shuffle because he had lost several toes as well as finger joints to leprosy. With a park guidebook, he sat on a convenient bench in the Town Square park at the beginning of Main Street, U. S. A. He appeared to be studying the guidebook, but was actually watching the entrance gates.

Charley watched the Leper from a tinted window of Disneyland City Hall, across the park, and radioed Casey Clay and Ladd on the platform of the nearby Disneyland Railroad Station. "He's

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here, Casey," said Charley.

"Got him," Casey affirmed. He pointed him out to Ladd. "He carries a .32 automatic in an ankle holster on his right leg."

"Small piece for a pro, isn't it?" Ladd asked.

"Not when the pro is as accurate as the Leper," Casey replied. "Those stubby fingers of his handle that gun like it's part of him. He's a deadly shot—and he uses magnum loads."

As they talked, a young man in his late twenties also casually entered the park. He did not act suspicious in any way, but he was alone, and, as was done with the Leper, one of Chief Franklin's security observers radioed into Town Square that he was on his way in. Charley and Franklin watched him come in, pause, and look around the square. Presently he located a woman and a little girl standing near a souvenir kiosk and went over to them.

"Casey," said Charley into his radio, "doesn't that guy look like Joey Dancer? Used to be a small-time hood out in the Valley?"

"The guy that dropped out of sight six or seven years ago?" Casey asked. "Was supposed to be on the run from the mob?"

"Yeah. Ripped off a courier or something."

"Could be," said Casey.

"Let's stay close on him, just in case."

"Check."

The man they thought was Joey Dancer walked up to the woman and little girl. "Hello, Edie."

"Hello, Joey."

He knelt down to the child, who was six. "You must be Jennifer. Your mom told me all about you when I talked to her on the phone the other day. You don't know me, but I was a friend of your daddy's—"

"Look, Joey, she didn't know her daddy, either, remember?" Edie said tightly. "Can we please just get on with this?"

Joey stood back up. "Relax, Edie. We can't just rush around. We have to look ordinary. Let's have a little fun first. I haven't had any fun in nearly seven years." He took the little girl's hand. "How about some ice cream to start the day, Jenny? And you call me 'Uncle Joey,' okay?"

Joey Dancer led Jenny and her mother down Main Street. From the bench where he was sitting, the Leper took a small mug-shot photo of Joey from his pocket, studied it briefly, then rose to follow them at a discreet distance.

"Looks like the Leper is tailing Dancer—if it *is* Dancer," said Casey into his radio. "But who's the woman and the kid?"

"Don't know," Charley answered.

"Who do you want on him, you or us?" Casey asked.

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Before Charley could answer, another alert came in from the front gate. "Another male coming in alone. Acting edgy, looking around. Young guy, early twenties, flat-top haircut. Carrying a windbreaker over his right arm, concealing his hand."

"I don't believe this," Franklin muttered to himself. "Most days we don't get three guys alone all day."

"Casey, we'll take the Leper," Charley said into the radio. "You and Ladd hook onto the guy with the windbreaker. Keep in touch."

"Roger."

Moments later, everyone—Dancer, Edie and Jenny, the Leper, Charley and Franklin, and Casey and Ladd—were mixing with the crowd walking leisurely up Main Street, U. S. A., toward the Main Plaza.

Behind all of them, a group of perhaps a dozen people departed Guided Tour Garden, an open-air gathering area just off Town Square park. Gate security, on the alert for lone males, had paid little attention to the group when it entered a few minutes earlier. Now, following a tour guide, it passed beyond Town Square park and up Main Street. One of the group, a stocky man in a Hawaiian shirt, carrying a Disneyland shopping bag for souvenirs, unobtrusively lagged back and stepped into one of the Main Street shops. The group moved on without him.

"I want to go to Fantasyland first!" Jenny said around a mouthful of ice cream.

"You're the boss," said Joey Dancer.

The two led Jenny's reluctant mother across a drawbridge and through a castle wall into the land of Peter Pan, Snow White, King Arthur, Mr. Toad, Dumbo, and a plethora of other marvelous rides and attractions for children.

"I want to ride the circus train!" shouted Jenny.

"Okay with you, Edie?" Joey asked.

"I suppose," said Edie, seeing the excitement in her daughter's face.

Joey put the young girl in a seat on the circus train, and he and Edie sat on a bench where they could watch her. Edie studied Joey in silence for several moments, then asked, "So where have you been hiding all this time?"

"The best place of all," Joey told her. "In prison. When I heard what happened to Johnny, I hopped the first bus out of town. Rode it to Oklahoma City. For a week or so I holed up in a motel, but I kept getting jumpier every day. I knew the mob hadn't found the money in your apartment when they killed Johnny, so they'd be after me. For sure they'd have the word out to spotters in every big city; I knew I'd have to get out of circulation for a while. So I took another bus to this little town about fifty miles away and I stuck

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up a drugstore in broad daylight." Joey grinned wryly. "Got a hundred and forty bucks. Then I just wandered around town until the law caught me. Took the clods nearly all afternoon. But it worked. A month later I was on my way to a joint called McAlester with six-to-ten-years to do." He shrugged. "I kept out of trouble and did six years and eight months." His expression darkened. "But that McAlester pen is some bad place. I wouldn't do it over again."

"It was still better than what Johnny got," Edie said bitterly.

"I know." Joey took her hand. "I'm sorry about Johnny—"

"Sorry!" Edie snatched her hand away. "You were the one who always got him in trouble! If it wasn't for you and your big ideas, he'd have found an honest job and—"

"Wait a minute!" Joey was stunned. "That's not true, Edie. Johnny was always the leader. I strung along with *him*. He was the only friend I had. But I never planned anything, never thought up any jobs. It was always Johnny, I swear it was."

Edie stared at him, her face wrinkling into a frown of uncertainty. Just then, the Circus Train came back in and she rose abruptly to go meet Jenny.

"Can we go to Sleeping Beauty's Castle now?" the little girl asked happily.

The Leper leaned against the outdoor Welch's Grape Juice Bar and watched the couple and little girl move about Fantasyland. Charley Ramm was just inside the open-air Gift Fair, watching the Leper. The agent code-named Fantasyland One, dressed as Robin Hood, circulated within eyesight.

The man with the windbreaker had entered Frontierland. The way he was carrying the windbreaker, it was still covering his right hand. Casey used a palm-size radio to immediately advise Frontierland One, who was patrolling the area dressed as Daniel Boone.

Several minutes later, Casey and Ladd met the officer near the River Belle Terrace and watched Windbreaker make his way down to the Tom Sawyer Island Rafts pier. "Looks like he's heading for Tom Sawyer Island," the officer said.

"You ride over on the same raft he does," Casey told Ladd. "We'll cover the pier in case he gets back without you."

Back in Fantasyland, Joey Dancer and Edie Flynn were having a soft drink while Jenny explored Captain Hook's Pirate Ship.

"Look, I know it's been rough for you since Johnny was killed," Joey said. "I knew you were close to having your baby when we planned that job in Denver, and I tried to talk Johnny out of it, but he wouldn't listen to me. He said it was too sweet to pass up. A day didn't go by in McAlester that I didn't wish we hadn't done it, or that I was out to help you. But you've got to believe me, Edie, I never led

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Johnny astray. I know you loved him, and you know he was my best friend, and I don't like talking against the dead, but it was *always* him that picked the jobs and made the plans, Edie. Always."

Edie Flynn sighed heavily: the hollow, weary sigh of a young woman with burdens beyond her years. "I guess I just don't want to admit that Johnny lied to me so much. He always said it was you. Joey was the bad influence. He had to help Joey out. Joey needed him. It was always you."

Joey shrugged. "He loved you, Edie. I don't blame him for saying that. Guys like Johnny and me, we have to lie to nice girls like you. Otherwise, you wouldn't have nothing to do with us."

Edie locked eyes with him. "You could be lying to me right now for that exact reason."

"I could," Joey admitted. "But I'm not." He took Edie's hand again. This time she did not draw away.

Watching them from the exit of the nearby Dumbo Flying Elephant ride was the Leper.

Watching all of them from the Mad Hatter's Tea Party ride was Charley Ramm.

At the raft pier, Casey Clay and Frontierland One were waiting for Ladd to return. The shifting scrutiny of Casey's eyes glanced downstream to the Mark Twain Steamboat dock, and suddenly stopped. The big paddle-wheeler had just pulled in and passengers were debarking. Among them was Windbreaker.

"Damn!" said Casey, pointing him out to Frontierland One. "He must have lost Ladd on the island. You stay in the area. I'll try to catch up with this guy!"

Windbreaker walked quickly back into Fantasyland. Casey radioed ahead to Fantasyland One; the officer dressed as Robin Hood hurried to intercept their man. But before Robin Hood could do so, Windbreaker rushed up the stairs to the Skyway Ride, and within seconds was in an overhead bucket being transported by cable wire across Fantasyland.

Casey ran up to the security man. "Where does he get off that thing?"

"Tomorrowland," the officer pointed. "It goes through that mountain over there, the Matterhorn, then all the way across Tomorrowland."

"Alert security in Tomorrowland," Casey said. "I'll try to follow him on the ground!"

The CBI agent moved rapidly through the crowd on the ground, watching Windbreaker in the ride above.

"Where has the money been all this time?" Edie Flynn asked.

"Hidden," Joey told her. "Inside the Pirates of the Caribbean

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ride. Come on, we'll get it."

Holding Edie's hand on one side and Jenny's on the other, Joey Dancer, feeling for all the world like a respectable young family man, led them back to the Plaza and into Adventureland. They walked under the big Swiss Family Treehouse and on to New Orleans Square, to what was arguably the most popular attraction in the park, the fantastic Pirates of the Caribbean ride.

They stood on a ramp to board the wide, flatbed boat that would carry them along the dark waterways where they would see life-size scenes of pirates looting and burning a town, fighting, singing, drinking ale with Victorian wenches, and carrying off their treasure to a great cave.

"We have to get the last seat in the boat," Joey told Edie. They maneuvered along the ramp to the right spot. Other people took the forward seats, and in a moment they were on their way into the dark water tunnel.

Charley watched the Leper take the front seat of the next boat. He himself boarded two seats behind the Leper.

Windbreaker reached the Skyway Terminal in Tomorrowland just ahead of Casey Clay on the ground. Running down the steps, he saw Casey hurrying toward him and reversed direction, rushing up the steps of the nearby People Mover, a caterpillar-like ride that wound around, over, and through Tomorrowland. From a moving boarding platform, Windbreaker jumped into an empty front car of a departing train. Casey, running after him, barely missed getting into the last car.

Looking back at him, Windbreaker smiled. Casey muttered a curse and radioed all officers. "Windbreaker's on the loose! He's on the People Mover!"

In the Pirates of the Caribbean flatboat, Joey whispered to Edie, "I'll be getting out as the boat passes alongside the pirate treasure cave. The money is hidden in one of the treasure chests. You and Jenny finish the ride, then go around and come back through in the last seat again. I'll get in with you as the boat goes by."

From the boat behind them, the Leper and Charley Ramm both saw Dancer's boat turn a corner. It was momentarily out of sight. When their own boat turned and it came back into view, they both saw that Joey was no longer with Edie and Jenny. They looked around urgently, searching, but Joey was nowhere to be seen in the huge, glittering display of the pirate treasure cave.

Having no viable option, the Leper remained in the boat, continuing to follow Edie and Jenny. Charley did the same.

Edie and Jenny Flynn left their boat and walked around to reenter the Pirates of the Caribbean ride. The Leper followed

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them. Charley followed him. Back inside, on the loading ramp, Edie and Jenny again got into the rear seat of a boat. The Leper and Charley again took the next boat. This time, the Leper glanced suspiciously back at Charley, remembering that he had been in the previous boat with him.

He's made me, Charley thought.

He saw the Leper bend forward to get the gun from his ankle holster.

The boat started its journey.

In Adventureland, the area security man, dressed as a jungle trader, spotted Windbreaker, who had left the People Mover and was now walking past the Big Game Shooting Gallery. He radioed the location to all other officers, then hurried to keep Windbreaker in sight. The fleeing man looked around anxiously, then quickly headed past New Orleans Square. Ahead of him was the exit of the Pirates of the Caribbean ride.

Adventureland One held back, concealing himself, and radioed the man's movements. Casey Clay, hearing the call, hurried across the Plaza toward New Orleans Square.

In the Pirates of the Caribbean tunnel, Joey Dancer stepped lightly back into the boat with Edie and Jenny. Behind them, the Leper now divided his time between watching Joey and looking back at Charley Ramm behind him.

The lead boat docked and Joey, Edie, and Jenny stepped onto the ramp. Joey now carried a knapsack slung over one shoulder.

"Joey, let's walk faster," Edie said, clutching his hand.

"What's the matter?" Joey asked tensely.

"I just feel funny," she said. "Maybe it's the money."

As Joey, Edie, and Jenny walked toward the exit, the next boat docked and the Leper leaped out and hurried after them at a stumbling but surprisingly rapid speed.

Charley, cut off by several other debarking passengers, fell a short distance behind.

Security Chief Franklin, who had been monitoring the calls from Adventureland One, picked up Casey on his way to New Orleans Square in an electric car.

"Lieutenant Ladd got back from Tom Sawyer Island," he told Casey. "Windbreaker lost him in the woods."

Presently they converged with Adventureland One, Frontierland One, and Fantasyland One on New Orleans Square.

Windbreaker was standing at the exit of Pirates of the Caribbean. His right hand was still concealed by the jacket he carried. Casey Clay and the others spread out to surround him.

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Just then, Joey Dancer, Edie, and Jenny came out of the Pirates exit. The Leper stepped directly behind them and pressed his gun just above Jenny's hip.

"You do what I tell you, or I'll blow her kidneys out," he said quietly to Joey and Edie.

Everyone stood stock-still.

"Hold it right there!" a voice shouted from the direction of Sara Lee's Cafe Orleans.

All eyes shifted quickly to the voice. It came from a Navy shore-patrol officer accompanied by two Marine military policemen. They moved with drill-like precision toward Windbreaker and apprehended him. When the jacket was taken from his arm, it revealed a dangling handcuff still locked to his wrist.

"He's a Navy deserter," the officer said as Casey came up and showed his CBI badge. "He escaped from a brig transfer bus by picking his handcuff lock. We'll take charge of him from here."

"You can have him," Casey said, shaking his head in exasperation.

Outside the Pirates exit, the Leper, his gun still pressed against little Jenny's side, looked back at Charley Ramm as he hurried up to them, hand under his jacket on his gun.

"I don't know who you are, mister," the Leper said, "but if you do anything I don't like, I'm gonna kill this kid here. Understood?"

Charley nodded. "Understood."

The Leper scooped Jenny up and carried her. She was trembling in fear. "Just be still, honey," her mother said, trembling just as much.

"Let's move," the Leper said to Joey and Edie. "Right down this street to the Plaza, then straight down Main Street to the entrance. When we get outside, we'll all get into a taxi and go for a little ride. Keep a good grip on that money, punk. Okay, move."

While Charley and the other officers looked helplessly on, the Leper guided his captives through Adventureland toward the Plaza entrance. As they passed the Big Game Shooting Gallery, with its staccato of loud pellet gunfire, one of the shooters there turned from the jungle targets and casually took a long-barreled, silencer-attached Sig revolver from a shopping bag of souvenirs. It was the stout man in the Hawaiian shirt who had come in with the tour group, then straggled away on his own.

Quickly fitting the revolver onto a dead-eye stock that he also took from the shopping bag, he attached the contraption with spring clamps to the inside of his right wrist and lower arm. With the weapon so attached, its potential accuracy was increased to that of a rifle. Quickly the stout man took aim and fired. A .38-caliber, Teflon-coated power slug hit the Leper in the center of the forehead, its shock killing him instantly, its impact causing him to

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drop Jenny as his body was hurled across a large display counter in front of Far East Imports.

Charley and the others, seeing the Leper fall, looked around frantically for the shooter. But before they could locate him, he fired again. His second shot dropped Joey Dancer.

Covering the gun with the shopping bag, the stout man moved quickly to Dancer's fallen body and snatched up the knapsack of money. Then he dashed out of Adventureland and into the Plaza. Charley and the others, spotting him now, immediately gave chase.

On the Plaza, the stout man leaped aboard one of the double-decker omnibuses that carried passengers up and down Main Street, U.S.A. The bus was heading for the main entrance at Town Square. Charley and the others spread out on both sides of Main Street, hurrying through the crowds, trying to keep up with the bus. Chief Franklin radioed ahead to front-gate security observers, ordering them into position to block the omnibus.

The stout man, seeing that he was being trapped, jumped from the bus in an attempt to escape on foot—but he mistimed his jump and went directly into the path of a horse-drawn trolley. A replica of America's turn-of-the-century trolleys, this one was pulled by a magnificent 1200-pound white draught horse. The stout man slipped when he hit the cobblestone street and went under the big horse. One of the animal's hooves caught him on the top of the head. He rolled unconscious to the side of the street.

Disneyland security men quickly moved him away.

At the park service entrance sometime later, an ambulance pulled in and Joey Dancer, on a stretcher, was put inside. "He's got a bad shoulder wound, but he'll recover," a paramedic said. Charley Ramm and Edie Flynn rode to the hospital with Joey. Casey Clay and Lieutenant Ladd followed behind with the little girl, Jenny.

In the ambulance, Dancer made a full confession to Charley. "The guy that set up the heist in the Denver airport was Jack Turban. He tipped Johnny Flynn about where the two money couriers would meet. For that, he was to get three hundred grand, and Johnny and I were to split five. What I didn't know was that he intended to take it all. But Johnny was smarter than me; he didn't trust Turban from the start, so when we got back to L.A. he decided to hide the bundle in Disneyland and find a way to get Turban's share to him without risking ours. But Turban was ahead of us; he sent two guys to hijack Johnny. I guess Johnny put up a fight and they whacked him; or maybe Turban ordered him killed, I don't know. Anyway, I got scared and split, like I said, and went underground in the McAlester pen in Oklahoma. I got out a week ago."

Charley nodded thoughtfully. "My guess is, Turban was partners with a hood in Chicago named Gino Cabrisi. And you're right when

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you say Turban probably ordered Flynn killed. You would have been next, but you disappeared too quickly, and too completely."

Charley sat back on the ambulance jump seat. He was frowning. Something didn't fit.

"Okay, now it's seven years later and you get out of McAlester," he said. "Turban and Cabrisi still want the same two things: the eight hundred grand—and you dead. They arrange for a hit man to take care of you and grab the money; that was the guy in the Hawaiian shirt that we caught. But again something goes wrong; a long-distance telephone call between Cabrisi and the hit man is accidentally overheard by a citizen in Chicago who takes the information to the police. Chicago P.D. identifies the voice of Cabrisi and sends one of their Organized Crime men out here to bring me into the case. After I hear the whole story, I'm convinced that Solomon Weiskoff, the one man who can authorize a hit in California, knows nothing about what's going on. So I let him know. He probably remembered the courier hijack—it was *his* money—and suspects that the guy who got away—you—might be coming back. So he sends his own personal killer, the Leper, to Disneyland to do the same thing that Cabrisi and Turban have sent *their* hit man to do: get you and get the money. So we had two killers and one target. Lucky thing for you that we knew who the Leper was; otherwise, you'd be a dead man back there." Charley paused, staring hard at Joey Dancer. "Just one thing doesn't make sense."

"Yeah," Joey Dancer said, as it dawned on him. His expression was half pain, half confusion. "How'd Turban know I was coming back when he didn't even know where I'd been? And how'd he know I'd be at Disneyland?"

Charley did not reply. He didn't want to be the one to tell him. But he didn't have to. Joey turned his eyes to Edie. At once, tears streaked down her cheeks.

"I told them, Joey," she admitted. "Turban had come around after Johnny's funeral. He said he'd make it well worth my while to let him know if you ever contacted me. I—I had always been convinced that it was you who was the bad influence who caused so much trouble in my marriage. So when you called me, I—I contacted Turban and told him all about it. He said for me to go ahead and meet you at Disneyland, that he'd have some men pick you up when we left the park."

"More than likely," Charley told her, "the hit man hired by Cabrisi and Turban was supposed to kill you and your little girl, too. Having to kill the Leper upset his timing. He shot Joey, then rushed to get the money."

"I'm—sorry, Joey," said Edie. "Now I've caused you to get shot and lose all that money—"

"The money doesn't matter," Joey said. "And the bullet hole will

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heal." He took Edie's hand and turned to Charley again. "What'll I get charged with for this? How much time do you figure I'll have to do?"

Charley studied the young couple. He thought of Marian and how much he wanted her back. After a moment, he shrugged softheartedly.

"The most I could probably get you for would be trespassing in the Disneyland pirate cave. I don't know what you'd get for that; ten days, maybe. But I could probably forget about it if you were planning to settle down. Go straight. Get married, maybe." The ambulance pulled up to the hospital and attendants opened the doors. "You think about it," Charley told him. "I'll visit you in a couple of days and we'll talk."

Charley went back to the escort car to join Casey and Ladd, as Jenny ran up to her mother and Joey Dancer.

That evening, Charley was once again sitting in the study of King Solomon Weiskoff. This time, he and the old mobster were sipping Napoleon brandy from lead crystal snifters.

"The guy we caught," Charley said, "is a Milwaukee torpedo named Gus Kowski. He was hired by Cabrisi and briefed by Turban when he got out here. He's agreed to give a full statement implicating both of them in a murder-for-hire conspiracy, in exchange for an agreement that the state won't ask for a death penalty against him for killing the Leper. Your nephew's going away, Mr. Weiskoff."

"Call me Sol," said the King. "You know, I always secretly admired you, Charley Ramm. The way you ripped us off took a lot of moxie. And you're right," he added ominously, "Jacob *will* be going away. Only not like you think."

"That's your business, not mine," Charley said. "I just want to make sure that you and I are square. I don't want to have to watch my back every time I step out a door."

"We're square," the King assured him. "I appreciate you coming to me."

When Charley left Beverly Hills, he felt good, felt refreshed, in spite of his battered face and bruised body. He decided to call Marian.

"Hey, it's me," he said when she answered. "Can I drop over?"

"For a while," she said. "If you promise not to bring up getting married again."

"I promise. Actually, all I want tonight is your lush body."

"Well, that can be arranged. Will I have time to put on my Victoria's Secret outfit and light candles in the bedroom?"

"Only if you hurry," Charley said. He clicked off.

Five minutes later, driving along Hollywood Boulevard, Charley

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glanced down a side street and saw three skinheads with a young black kid backed up against a building. The black kid was fighting off all three of them. Charley made a quick U-turn and swung around the corner. As he got out of his car, the skinheads turned threateningly toward him. Charley pulled back his coat so they could see the holstered Glock.

"Don't even think about it, assholes," he said. "I've got a badge, too."

The skinheads hurried off down the street.

"Thanks, mister," the black kid said. "They jumped me for no reason."

"They had a reason. You're the wrong shade of white. You were doing pretty good against all three of them. Where'd you learn to fight?"

The kid shrugged. "Here and there."

"What's your name?"

"Marvin Moore."

Charley almost smiled. Marvin Moore. As in Marvin Hagler and Archie Moore, two of the greatest fighters of all time. "What do you weigh, Marvin?"

"Hunnerd and sixty. Why?"

One-sixty. A solid middleweight. "Take a ride with me," Charley said. The kid hung back, suspicious. "I just want you to meet somebody," Charley assured him. "Look, I helped you out, didn't I?"

Marvin got in the car with him and Charley drove away. He dialed his cell phone again.

"Chula," he said when the call was answered, "meet me at the gym in thirty minutes. I want you to meet the future middleweight champion of the world."

Smiling, he turned onto the freeway and headed for East Los Angeles.

In her apartment, wearing less than six ounces of pale pink silk, Marian was lighting candles. ●

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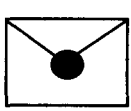

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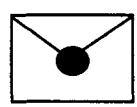

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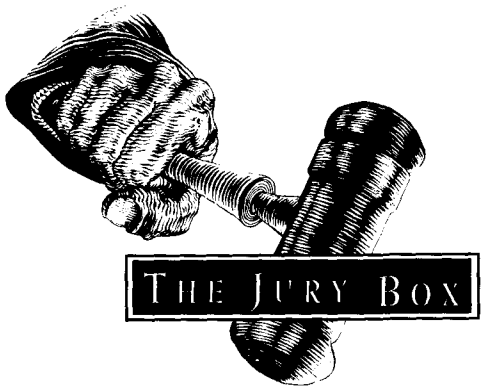

by Jon L. Breen

You've heard of movies going direct to video. How about a mystery novel going direct to radio? The first item reviewed below could work quite effectively on the printed page, but its 1940 period and swing music background make it even more fun as a six-hour audiotape.

*** Hal Glatzer: *Too Dead to Swing,* Audio-Playwrights, audioplay.com, $29.95. Following an all-female band on a murder-interrupted California tour, Glatzer's novel captures the period and the train and bandstand backgrounds flawlessly and delivers a surprising but scrupulously clued puzzle. Future cases in the same format are promised for narrator and amateur detective Katy Green, delightful company as voiced by Susan Egan, who heads a cast of Broadway pros. Ann Hampton Callaway sings three original songs, also by Glatzer though attributed to fictitious bandleader Ted Nywatt, that are excellent in themselves as well as remarkable pastiches of the period's melodic and lyric styles.

*** Max Allan Collins: *The Pearl Harbor Murders,* Berkley, $6.99. The third in a series based on 20th-century disasters makes Edgar Rice Burroughs, creator of Tarzan, the sleuth in the Hawaii of December 1941. As usual, Collins brings his time, place, and people to vivid life, crediting his sources (along with wizard researcher George Hagenauer) in a concluding bibliographic essay. The blockbuster movie *Pearl Harbor* has great battle scenes, but Collins's story is better.

*** Ron Goulart: *Groucho Marx and the Broadway Murders,* St. Martin's/Minotaur, $22.95. In half a century as science fiction and mystery humorist, one of Goulart's best ideas has been making an amateur detective of Groucho. The fourth in the very funny series includes rides on the Super Chief and Twentieth Century Limited, a visit to the 1939 World's Fair, a passable

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whodunit featuring one genuine fair-play clue, and Marxian dialogue that would not have disgraced George S. Kaufmann, Morey Riskind, S.J. Perelman, or the great man himself.

*** Sheila Pim: *Common or Garden Crime,* Rue Morgue, $14. First published in Britain in 1945, this village gardening cozy depicts with style and humor everyday life and varying attitudes toward World War II in neutral Ireland. Tom and Enid Schantz provide their usual informative introduction. Rue Morgue also promises Pim's other three mysteries, starting with 1952's *A Hive of Suspects* ($14), the only one to have seen previous American publication.

*** Parnell Hall: *Cozy,* Carroll & Graf/Penzler, $25. New York actor/writer/private eye Stanley Hastings, one of this department's favorite sleuths, goes on vacation with wife Alice to a New England inn and encounters murder among a closed circle of suspects. Hall's gentle send-up of the titular mystery genre makes inventive use of those two cozy staples, cats and recipes, plus a commodity missing from too many contemporary cozies: clues.

*** Laura Joh Rowland: *Black Lotus,* St. Martin's/Minotaur, $24.95. In 17th-century Japan, samurai sleuth Sano Ichiro asks wife Reiko to interview a female suspect in a fire and triple murder at the Black Lotus Temple, home to a mysterious Buddhist cult of growing popularity and influence. Reiko's friendship with the young woman threatens both their marriage and Sano's high position as the Shogun's top investigator. This is a highly individual piece of work, notable for involving characters, narrative drive, and (most important) a view of a time and a culture unfamiliar to most readers. (Small complaint: Rowland's use of the 20th-century word "scenario" in both narrative and dialogue jangled a bit.)

*** Thomas B. Sawyer: *The Sixteenth Man,* iUniverse, $16.95. This outstanding first novel by a former writer and producer of *Murder, She Wrote* alternates two stories, at first seemingly unconnected: In the present, an archaeologist discovers some very old bones accompanied by a much newer set near Moab, Utah; in November 1963, a Reno private eye looking for divorce evidence becomes embroiled in one of the 20th century's greatest (maybe) unsolved crimes. If many more thrillers this good appear in the books-on-demand format, the world of publishing will be turned upside down—or do I mean right side up?

*** Wendelin Van Draanen: *Sammy Keyes and the Hollywood Mummy,* Knopf, $14.95. The early-teen heroine of this Edgar-winning juvenile series (full first name "Samantha") and best friend Marissa go from their small-town California home to Hollywood, where

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Sammy's irresponsible mother is pursuing an acting career as pupil of a disreputable agent. Sammy deals with a grittier world than Nancy Drew, confronting the murder of one of her mother's fellow aspirants. Strong on humor, suspense, and atmosphere, the novel should delight girls as well as some adults. (I hope that the author's distracting shifts between past and present tense won't influence how her readers write their classroom essays.)

** Laura Crum: *Breakaway,* St. Martin's/Minotaur, $22.95. Veterinarian Gail McCarthy's battle with depression and the problems of her equine patients occupy more pages and create more reader interest than a couple of murders (the main one, promised in the promotional copy, doesn't occur until four fifths of the way through the book) or the tantalizing problem of who is committing nighttime sexual assaults on mares. True, there's a whodunit, resolved without recourse to clues by one of the most venerable devices in the genre, but calling this a mystery is very close to false advertising.

** Ridley Pearson: *Parallel Lies,* Hyperion, $23.95. Claustrophobic National Transportation Safety Board investigator (white male) joins forces with railroad security officer (black female) to track down not-unsympathetic serial derailer (Hispanic male) with a grudge against the Northern Union Railroad. With admirable research and organization come clichés of plot, prose, and dialogue. Lacking compelling characters, this type of thriller works better as a movie or miniseries.

The audio abridgement of Kathy Reichs's latest novel *Fatal Voyage* (Simon & Schuster Audio, $26), in which forensic anthropologist Temperance Brennan investigates an air disaster, may be preferable to the print version. The intriguing plot and some fascinating technical details are intact; reader Katherine Borowitz does her job well; and if such minutiae as the applying of makeup and what brand of panties Temperance buys made the abridger's cut, how padded must the whole novel be?

Those who collect vintage paperbacks or merely enjoy superb illustrations of beautiful women won't want to miss *The Paperback Covers of Robert McGinnis* (Pond Press, $40 hardcover; $29.95 paper), a unique illustrated bibliography compiled by Art Scott and Dr. Wallace Maynard, with an introduction by Richard S. Prather. While not all of the hundreds of covers reproduced in color belong to mysteries (and some don't even feature sexy women), McGinnis is best known for helping sell the works of writers like Brett Halliday, John D. MacDonald, Prather, and Carter Brown.

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St. John and the Dragon

by Edward D. Hoch

2001 has been a stellar year for Edward D. Hoch: named Grand Master of the Mystery Writers of America in May, nominated, in June, for the Bouchercon World Mystery Convention's Anthony Award for Best Short Story (for "The Problem of the Potting Shed" [*EQMM* July '00]), and Lifetime Achievement Award winner at this year's Bouchercon Convention, which convenes November 1st. ‡

The years following the conclusion of the Revolutionary War had been good ones for Alexander Swift. His former wife had remarried for a second time in New York City, and Swift himself had finally married Molly McVey in a joyous ceremony at West Point. Their first son had been born a year later. He had remained close to General Washington, and in 1785, when Washington was named president of the Potomac Navigation Company, he'd hired Swift as one of his assistants.

The company had been chartered by Virginia and Maryland to build a canal and road system linking the Potomac and Ohio rivers, but it soon became clear to Swift that his duties extended well beyond this. His special assignments for the General were to continue. Thus it was not surprising that in the summer of 1787 Washington summoned him to the State House in Philadelphia, where the new nation's constitutional convention had begun. It was a hot and humid summer in the city, and he arrived for his appointment in time to see Benjamin Franklin, age 81 and president of Pennsylvania's Supreme Executive Council, being carried in a sedan chair borne by trustee convicts. A crowd of spectators cheered his arrival and Swift slipped unnoticed into the building.

George Washington was awaiting his arrival in a second-floor office. "It is good to see you again, Alex."

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"And you, too, General."

"I had feared you might grow fat and lazy at that desk job with the Potomac."

"They keep me busy, sir."

"Good, good." He cleared his throat, getting to the point of the meeting. "Alex, I want you to go to Canada for me."

"Certainly, General. What is the purpose of my mission?"

"Our old nemesis Benedict Arnold is back on this side of the ocean."

Following the British surrender at Yorktown, Arnold had fled to England, where his wife Peggy had joined him soon thereafter. Swift heard that they had two children now, and that Arnold had pleaded with George III to be placed in command of an army to retake the colonies. The king had finally agreed, but Parliament wanted no part of it and the idea died.

"He's in Canada?"

Washington nodded. "He and his family are in St. John, a thriving community in New Brunswick, not sixty miles across the border from the Maine territory claimed by Massachusetts. Following the British surrender, thousands of Loyalists fled to St. John. Its population increased so quickly that it has been incorporated as Canada's first city. Now Arnold has gone there to open a trading post. Somehow I cannot imagine that scoundrel engaged in a legitimate enterprise. He is up to something, and we must know what it is."

Swift nodded. "I will do what I can to find out," he promised.

That night, when he told Molly that Washington was sending him on a special assignment to Canada, she looked unhappy. "I thought the war was over, Alex."

"So did I."

Swift allowed his beard to grow for a few days, hoping it would alter his appearance somewhat. Then, carrying a minimum of supplies in a saddlebag, he traveled on foot through the Maine woods to the vaguely defined border with Canada. He camped out for one night under a starry sky, planning to complete his journey the following day. In the morning, he came to a dirt road which, according to Washington's careful instructions, should lead him into St. John.

Before long he was lucky to encounter a farmer bringing a load of corn to market in his wagon. "Need a ride, mister?" he called down as he was passing Swift.

"I could use one. You heading for St. John?"

"Sure am!" He held out his hand to help Swift up. "I'm Richard Hanson."

"Alex Smith. Glad to meet you."

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Hanson was a handsome young man, barely past thirty, dressed in farm clothes with pants tucked into his boots. An old straw hat shielded his face from the sun, but Swift could see that it was already taking on a weathered look. "You looking for work?"

"I am. Know of any?"

"Nothing special, but St. John is growing since it became a city. Lots of new businesses and new people. I work the farm with the wife and kids, and we can hardly keep up with the demand."

They topped a rise and the tall masts of distant sailing ships came into view. "It looks as if they've got quite a port there."

"The Bay of Fundy is one of the best in the world, but the sailors say it's a treacherous one. Because of the way the channels funnel water into the harbor, they have tremendous tides, sometimes forty feet or more in the spring. I've talked with ships' captains who've never seen anything like it."

"Isn't it dangerous for the ships at anchor?"

"The bay is deep enough for safety, so long as they're careful. But those tides are something to face twice a day. They have a sea wall to protect against storm surges. As if that wasn't enough, these last two months there have been reports of a sea serpent or dragon in the bay."

"Really?"

"Well, only a few sailors have seen it, usually after a night of drinking in the taverns. I haven't been convinced."

They were coming into the city itself, and Hanson pulled on the reins to slow the horses down a bit. There were rows of wooden or stone buildings on either side of the road, one or two stories high, and further along Swift could see the steeples of three churches towering over them. Their wagon crossed a bridge over a narrow strait and they entered the main shopping area, close to a public market that was Hanson's destination.

"You will notice the water on two sides of us," the farmer said. "The city could be well defended against attack from the former colonies. Perhaps that is one reason so many Loyalists fled here." He brought the wagon to a stop. "Shall I drop you here at the dock? The ships are often hiring crewmen for the return voyage to England."

Swift shrugged. "This is as good a place as any. Tell me, is there a nearby inn where I could stay?"

"The Schooner, just down the road. See Juliette and tell her I sent you. I deliver fresh eggs from the farm every morning and that is one of my stops."

"What about jobs here in the city? There must be some trading companies with all this shipping activity."

"You see that new warehouse up on the hill? A man named Arnold just built it this spring. He came from London but he talks

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like you. It's the West Indies Trading Company. He might need help."

Swift thanked him and jumped down from the wagon. Hanson backed into position at the market and began to unload his corn.

Walking along the harbor road, past the tall ships at the end of their long piers, Swift wondered what had attracted Benedict Arnold to a place like this. Could he hope to organize these Loyalists from the colonies for an invasion? Halfway down the block he stopped in a general store that seemed to sell everything from cheesecloth to muskets. He was buying some tobacco when he heard a half-remembered feminine voice telling a clerk, "You do not need to wrap it. My driver will carry it to the carriage."

It was a voice he could never forget. Peggy Shippen. Peggy Arnold. The traitor's wife.

Alexander Swift retreated quickly from the store before she saw him. He took up a position across the road and watched while a slim man with a stringy black beard carried her purchases to a waiting carriage. Then Peggy appeared, looking as attractive as he remembered her, but with her hair cut shorter. How old would she be now? Twenty-six? The driver helped her into the carriage. "Thank you, Pierre," she told him, and they rode off.

Watching her like that, he remembered her wedding day in Philadelphia on the verge of her eighteenth birthday. He'd been there as General Washington's representative, and a joyous occasion it had been. Now so much had changed for them all. He walked along quickly after the carriage, watching it turn up the hill toward the trading company. A man came out to greet them, walking with a limp, and even at that distance he recognized Benedict Arnold.

Still carrying his possessions in the saddlebag, Swift thought about renting a horse but decided he probably wouldn't need one. Instead he walked back in the other direction until he found the Schooner Inn. It was a two-story gabled house with a little porch overlooking the harbor. He went in and found an attractive young woman in a gray blouse and long skirt working at a desk before a painting of a schooner under full sail.

She greeted him with a smile and a distinct French accent. "Hello. May I help you?"

"I am looking for a place to stay. Mr. Hanson suggested I try here."

"Richard, yes! I know him very well. He delivers our eggs. How long would you be staying?"

"A few days, maybe more."

"I will need three nights in advance. Here's your key. Room

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number six at the top of the stairs. I serve breakfast in the morning. When you go out, leave the key at my desk."

"Do you work day and night?"

"One of our guests, Mrs. Meadows, helps me out in the evening. I'm usually here the rest of the time if you need anything. My name is Juliette." She glanced at the saddlebag he was carrying. "Do you have a horse?"

"I had to sell it. I thought of renting one but decided I should get a job first. If I end up on a sailing ship a horse would not be of much use."

"True enough."

The room was clean and pleasant enough, with a soft bed, a pitcher and bowl, and a commode in one corner. The window provided an excellent view of the harbor, though Arnold's warehouse was just out of sight. He unpacked his saddlebag, washed up, and went back downstairs. It was almost time for supper.

"Enjoy your stay," Juliette told him.

"I hope to. Do you run this place all by yourself?"

She nodded. "My father died two years ago and left it to my brother and me. We could have sold it, but I wanted an adventure so I moved here from Montreal. He's still there."

"Someone told me there's been a sea serpent or something like it in the harbor recently."

She laughed. "Seen only by sailors at midnight after too much beer and rum. You have nothing to fear."

"It's safe for swimming, then?"

"So long as you're aware of the tides. They turn very swiftly here. One of our new arrivals, Mrs. Arnold, swims frequently. She even had a bathing-machine sent from England."

He filed that fact away for later. "Is her husband the man with the trading post on the hill?"

"Yes. I know little about them, but they have two lovely children."

At the door he thought of one more question. "Where is a good place to eat?"

"The Fundy Tavern, about a mile down the road."

"I will try it on your recommendation," he told her with a smile.

The Fundy was in a row of bars and taverns facing the docks and obviously popular with seamen. One of the ships, a brigantine named *King George II,* was newly arrived in port and was still being unloaded of its cargo. Swift found a table and ordered a fish dinner from the menu board.

Presently a bearded seaman joined him. "Mind if I eat with you, laddie?"

"Not at all. Sit down."

The man was about Swift's age, with powerful muscles and a

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sailor's weathered face. "Name is Cotton Wayne," he said, extending his hand.

"Alex Smith. Are you off one of the ships?"

The seaman nodded. "The *George,* that brigantine. Just made port today."

"This seems like a busy place."

Wayne nodded. "It is. More cargo coming in than going out, though. Mostly machinery from England. This is my third trip since winter. These folks need everything. On the last trip we even sold some of our lead ballast."

"Have you seen the dragon that's supposed to be in the harbor?"

"That devil tide is enough of a dragon for me."

They chatted about England and the sea, and after a leisurely supper that lasted until dark Swift suggested they walk down the sea wall steps to the beach. "How far up does the water come?" he wanted to know.

"All the way to this sea wall at high tide."

They were on a direct line with Arnold's warehouse up the hill. Ahead of them in the surf, bathed in the light of a nearly full moon, Swift could see a wooden structure that looked for all the world like an outhouse on wheels. "What is that?" he asked.

"A bathing-machine. They're popular on English beaches but you don't often see them over here. A woman had that shipped over this summer. They can change their clothes in there and step directly into the water without being seen in their swimming attire. It's rolled down and positioned wherever you want it."

He remembered Juliette mentioning that Peggy Arnold had one. Obviously this was it. The evening tide was rising fast and Swift stopped to remove his boots before wading out for a look at the front of the structure. It had a new wide door in place, firmly closed with a heavy padlock.

They strolled back to the harbor road and parted. He noticed that Wayne headed for the next tavern down the line, but Swift didn't join him. There was too much to think about.

He was starting back up the road to the Schooner Inn when someone stepped out of the shadows to intercept him. He froze when he recognized Peggy Arnold's carriage driver. "You're new around here."

"I'm passing through. Name's Alex Smith. Who are you?"

"Pierre," the slim man replied. "I heard you in the Fundy earlier, asking about the dragon."

"Are the stories true?"

"True enough. He's out there."

"I would like to see this dragon or serpent or whatever he is."

Pierre eyed him slyly. "For ten pounds I would show him to you."

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"Ten pounds is a great deal of money. Let me think about it. Where can I find you?"

"I usually eat supper at the Fundy."

"Very well. I might take up your offer when I get some money."

Pierre slouched off into the night and Swift continued on his way. As he reached the stone walk leading into the Schooner Inn he saw Juliette coming out, her long skirt sweeping the ground. "Good evening, Mr. Smith."

"Good evening. Are you going out this late?"

"Only for my nightly walk on the beach. I like to see the tide rush in, and feel my toes in the sand."

"It sounds ideal. May I join you?"

She smiled sadly. "I'm afraid not. I really treasure this time alone every evening. But Mrs. Meadows is inside. She'll give you your key."

He entered the inn to be greeted by a pleasant white-haired woman who reminded him just a bit of General Washington's wife Martha. "Good evening, I'm Mrs. Meadows. Are you a guest here?"

Swift nodded. "Alex Smith, room six."

She handed him the key. "Have a pleasant night."

Upstairs, gazing at the harbor, he could just make out Juliette's tall figure striding across the sand as the tide rushed in.

In the morning he was awakened early by sounds of conversation at the foot of the stairs. When he went down he found Juliette in excited conversation with Hanson, the egg farmer, and Mrs. Meadows. "I saw the dragon last night," she told Swift. "It was right offshore in the moonlight. I wouldn't have believed it!"

"What did it look like?"

"The head wasn't too large and it was close to the water, covered with waves much of the time. What I saw of it seemed like a dragon. I couldn't be sure of the color, but it might have been dark green. I watched it for a minute or two and then it disappeared."

"And you hadn't been drinking?" Hanson asked with a smile.

She shifted his basket of eggs as if she might throw one at him. "I hadn't a drop. Mr. Smith saw me leaving on his way in. He will vouch for my sobriety."

"I do," Swift answered sincerely.

"Then it seems we have a real witness to the dragon at last." Hanson scratched his head. "What do we do now? Organize the townspeople to go hunting for it?"

"First we have breakfast," Juliette announced, holding up the fresh eggs. Hanson went on to make the rest of his deliveries and Swift accompanied Mrs. Meadows into the little dining room. She proved to be an interesting breakfast companion, telling him of

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her younger days accompanying her late husband on fur-trading journeys among the Eskimos.

After breakfast he walked down to the docks and watched the ships taking on cargo for their return voyages. Then he walked a few blocks away from the harbor and circled around the back of Arnold's warehouse. There was no great activity, and only a few men were visible. He saw no sign of Peggy's carriage or her driver. In the afternoon he boarded a couple of the ships, going through the motions of seeking employment, always making sure no one would really hire him.

That evening he dined again with Cotton Wayne, who was disturbed that their return trip would be delayed while they awaited a cargo of lumber that hadn't yet arrived. "The woman at the Schooner Inn saw the dragon last night," Swift told him at one point.

"I heard that. I suppose something must be out there."

"Do you think it's really a dragon?"

The seaman shrugged. "With these tides, most anything could get swept into the Bay of Fundy from the deepest parts of the ocean."

There was no sign of Pierre at the tavern that night. Later, when Wayne had departed, Swift made his way down the sea wall steps to the damp sand. As the rising tide drew closer he stood in the darkness against the wall and watched for the dragon. It never came, nor did anyone else. From time to time he could hear people on the road above him on the lookout for it, too, but all were disappointed.

Swift watched the rising waters creep up the side of Peggy's bathing-machine until the whole thing was under water. He was forced to retreat a bit up the stone steps as the tide lapped at his boots. He stayed until midnight, when the tide began retreating as quickly as it had come. There was no dragon tonight.

He went back to his room, accepting the key from a drowsy Mrs. Meadows.

This time it was her scream that awakened him. He was surprised to see that it was already dawn, that he had slept some five hours. He hurried to the top of the stairs and called down. "What happened?"

It was the farmer Hanson, but he had no eggs in his hand. "I was starting my deliveries and I saw something out by the water. I stopped my wagon and ran down to have a look. It was Juliette. She's dead! She's been cut and clawed by something."

Swift dressed quickly and followed him out of the inn, hurrying along the sea wall to the nearest steps. The morning tide was beginning to turn, gathering power for its assault on the beach.

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Mrs. Meadows had composed herself enough to follow, and some of the early-rising sailors were about, too. He saw Cotton Wayne observing them from the top of the sea wall before starting down. Already they could make out the body in the shallow water, turned slowly as the incoming waves lapped at it.

Swift came upon Hanson's footprints, firmly embedded in the damp sand, and followed them straight to the body. The tracks stopped a few feet away and then started back. Ignoring the water, Swift gripped the body under the arms and pulled it up away from the waves. He uncovered Juliette's torso and legs, revealing the wounds Hanson had described. There were gouges and cuts, and three parallel red lines that looked like claw marks. He guessed she had been dead for some hours. "The dragon!" someone in the gathering crowd said with a gasp. Perhaps the worst thing for Swift was the stray band of seaweed entangled in her toes, a touch that seemed out of place on a corpse. He glanced around in the water, searching for clues, but found nothing.

The city constable was informed, and within an hour the body had been removed. A watchman was assigned to keep a lookout for the dragon and sound an alarm if it was seen. "She shouldn't have gone out there again," Hanson said as he and Swift walked back to his wagon and its patient horses. He sorted through the baskets of eggs, tossing aside a rusty rake and a pair of shoes. "Would you like some eggs?" Hanson asked. "I doubt if Mrs. Meadows will be preparing breakfast."

"No, thanks. I will get something at one of the taverns." Swift noticed a small barrel in the back of the wagon with everything else. "What's that?"

"Gunpowder," Hanson replied. "I use it to blast out tree stumps on the farm."

"Where do you buy it?"

"At the general store, along with everything else. If you ever try using any, though, be sure you have a long fuse. It can be very dangerous."

The farmer went on his way. Swift ate breakfast alone, trying not to think of Juliette's dead body and what he had done wrong. Might she still have been alive if he hadn't come to St. John?

Then he spotted Pierre, passing by the window of the tavern. He abandoned the remains of his breakfast and ran out after the slim man. "Pierre!"

Peggy's carriage driver turned, seeming not to recognize Swift for a moment. Then he asked, "What do you want?"

"To see the dragon. I have the ten pounds."

"Things have happened. It may be too late now."

"I have twenty pounds. Ten now and another ten when you take me there."

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He thought about it, then said, "Not now. Maybe tonight."

"Where and when?"

"The sea wall steps on this end. Nine o'clock, just after dark."

"I'll be there."

"Give me ten now."

Swift handed him the currency, wondering if he'd ever see the man again. Men like Pierre had been known to do crazy things with that much money. His only hope was that the second ten would prove even more tempting.

Next he went to the general store, where he made some purchases. He spent the afternoon in his room, writing out a detailed report to General Washington, telling him everything he'd found and just what it meant. If something happened to him, he hoped this report might find its way back to Philadelphia.

That evening he ate another meal at the Fundy, then walked around a bit until it was time to meet Pierre at the top of the steps at nine o'clock. "This can be very dangerous," the slim man told him. "Give me the other ten pounds."

"Here." Swift passed it over.

"Come quickly, but first take off your boots. We will have to wade in the surf."

Swift did as he was told and then followed the man across the damp sand. Once more the tide was turning, rising so quickly that removing his boots and rolling up his pant legs did little good. Pierre was headed for the bathing-machine, and by the time they reached it the tide was up to their thighs.

"In here," he said, directing Swift to the door of the little structure. Swift went up the three wooden steps, noticed the padlock was off the door, and opened it.

There was the dragon, as promised. It was a large egg-shaped device made of oak staves reinforced with iron bands, filling the entire inside of the bathing-machine. On its top had been affixed the carefully carved wooden head of a dragon, painted sea-green. Around its base, lead ballast had been piled to keep the structure from rising with the tide.

Suddenly Pierre's hands collided with his back, sending him toppling forward. He hit against the wooden egg just as the man slammed the door shut. Swift heard the padlock snap closed. "Pierre! What is this? Open up!"

"With the compliments of Benedict Arnold!" the man shouted through the door. "Enjoy your last minutes on earth. The bathing-machine will be completely under the tidal water in less than a half-hour."

Then there was silence, except for the increased pounding of the surf. Swift hit the door with his shoulder but it didn't budge. He remembered it was new, of a special width to allow the Dragon

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inside. He felt dampness on his feet and saw that the water was rising through the cracks between the floorboards. Picking up the oil lamp, he held it to the ceiling. The wood charred a bit but was too saturated with water to catch fire.

All right, he thought calmly. There is a way out of this.

This Dragon was merely a British copy of the *Turtle,* the one-man submarine he'd once piloted around New York harbor when the British were in command of the city. He was not surprised that they were experimenting with it, and that Benedict Arnold had brought it here to St. John for testing. Certainly the enormous tidal changes in the Bay of Fundy made it the perfect place to test an underwater craft.

He'd suspected something like this ever since the seaman Cotton Wayne told him of someone buying the lead ballast from one of the sailing ships. Lead ballast was necessary for submarines, and the bathing-machine itself needed it to keep from floating off while the Dragon was out in the open water. Swift had watched that bathing-machine remain steady the previous night as the tidal water rose above it, and he knew then that it must contain something heavy.

But now it was time for action. The carved dragon's head on top of the submarine, no doubt put there to frighten or mislead anyone who saw it in the water, could be his salvation. In earlier days, when armies used battering rams against fortified positions, there was sometimes an actual ram's head carved onto the business end of the device. He was hoping the dragon's head would serve the same purpose, and he was about to find out. The water was almost to his waist.

Quickly he opened the hatch of the one-man submarine, climbed inside with the lamp, and closed it against the rising water. It was a tighter fit than the American original, but he was relieved to find that the controls were very similar to the *Turtle* built by David Bushnell. He could only imagine what harm the British could do to the fledgling American navy with a fleet of these, traveling underwater to attach explosive charges to the hulls of ships.

As with the *Turtle,* lateral and vertical screw propellers, operated by hand, propelled the Dragon. There was also a hand-operated rudder, and small portholes near the top of the vessel. A valve was opened to admit sea water into a ballast tank, causing the craft to sink. When raising it, the ballast tank was emptied with a hand pump. Lead ballast in the bottom kept it upright. Swift knew the closed compartment held only enough oxygen for about thirty minutes, though there was also a breathing tube for when the craft was close to the surface.

He waited until the water level rose well above the Dragon's portholes and opened the valve to admit the sea water. Then he

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closed it and started working the hand pump as fast as he could. He quickly realized that his vision of the dragon's head battering through the roof of the bathing-machine was a futile one. The submarine rose slowly, but with virtually no force at all. It nudged the wooden roof and rested there. He took it down for one more try, trying not to panic.

This time the underwater craft rose a bit faster. It hit the roof with more force and the wood separated into two parts on hinges that swung open to the night sky. Of course! They couldn't take it out the door every time they wanted to test it. The operator simply sat in the Dragon until the tide was high enough and then rose right through the roof of the bathing-machine. That was why they'd needed the ballast to keep the bathing-machine in one place, so the submarine could return the same way.

The strong tidal waters were tossing the Dragon around a bit, and he was anxious to settle down in one piece. Working the screw propellers, he headed for shallow water, finally settling down safely in the shadow of some rocks where the Dragon could pass unnoticed for a time. He climbed out and hurried to an outcropping in the sea wall where he'd hidden the supplies he bought earlier.

The barrel of gunpowder went into the Dragon, with the long fuse Hanson had recommended. He lit the fuse and hurried up the sea wall steps to the road. Pierre was having a casual drink at the Fundy bar with a couple of seamen. The color drained from his face when Swift walked in.

His hand grabbed the neck of a bottle, but Swift was faster. His left fist drove deep into Pierre's gut, and when the man doubled over Swift floored him with a right uppercut. Just then the sound of the explosion reached their ears. Pierre, still groggy, rolled over on the floor. "What was that?"

"The demise of your Dragon. I was told to use a long fuse."

Swift didn't know exactly what to expect the following morning at the Schooner Inn. He'd been awake much of the night, seated in a chair facing the door, waiting for Pierre or perhaps Benedict Arnold himself to walk through it. When neither one had come by dawn, he washed and changed his clothes, preparing to leave after breakfast. Downstairs, he found Mrs. Meadows very much in charge, whipping up eggs with the help of the farmer Hanson.

"I have written to Juliette's brother," she explained, "telling him I will keep the inn open until he arrives. That is the least I can do for the poor man."

Alexander Swift nodded. The time was not yet right to say any more. Instead he turned to Hanson. "Will you be heading back to your farm after breakfast?"

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"I will. All the eggs are delivered."

"I am returning to Maine," Swift told him. "I'll ride with you that far."

But before he could leave, Mrs. Meadows brought him word that a young woman had arrived alone in a carriage to see him. Puzzled as to who it could be, Swift walked out to the entrance hall.

And faced Peggy Arnold.

"Hello, Alex," she said.

"Peggy! It's been many years—"

"I recognized you at the store the other day. I had to tell my husband."

"He sent Pierre to kill me last night."

"I didn't know that until later. I did not want this, any of it. But he is my husband. Pierre came with us from England. He has been testing the Dragon in the tidal waters two or three nights each week."

"Why did you come here this morning?"

"When you blew up the submarine last night it infuriated Benedict. He has ordered Pierre to kill you at any cost."

"You do not owe me a warning."

"Not you personally, perhaps, but I know you come here on behalf of General Washington. My home is in England now, and I will never return to America. But I owe something to my homeland. Leave St. John at once, and may God bless your new nation."

"Thank you, Peggy."

Within a half-hour he was on the road with Hanson, heading home. The morning sky was bright, with a refreshing breeze off the bay. "We have had a nice summer," the farmer said. "But for Juliette's tragic death, it would have been a perfect summer."

"I have to ask you about that, Hanson."

"Ask me?"

"Why did you kill her?"

"I didn't! It was that man Pierre, wasn't it?"

"It was you," Swift insisted. "It couldn't have been anyone else. You see, Juliette claimed she went walking along the beach every evening. On the night she was killed I was down there until midnight. She never came. You said you spotted her body in the morning and ran out to it. But your footprints were firm and deep in the sand, not running footprints at all. The prints stopped a few feet from the body, yet you described her wounds—wounds I couldn't even see until I had uncovered her. Later, when you were rearranging the eggs in the back of this wagon, I saw a rake with what appeared to be rust spots on it. I now think that was dried blood, and that the rake made those clawlike scratches on her side. There was a pair of shoes back there, too. You wear boots, but Juli-

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ette was barefoot when we found her body. I remember the seaweed on her toes, and there was no sign of her shoes or anything else near the body. Those shoes were hers, weren't they? She was with you in this wagon when she was supposed to be walking on the beach. You killed her here, then used the rake to simulate claw marks. It was her sighting of the supposed dragon that gave you the idea. You carried the body down there after midnight, choosing a route where the retreating tide would wash away your prints. Yesterday morning when you came in with your eggs, the body was still out there so you walked down and pretended to find it."

Hanson was silent for a full minute. When he finally spoke, it was almost to himself. "I have a wife and family who love me. I must have been mad to get involved with Juliette. And then I couldn't break it off. I knew that as long as she was alive I could never stay away from her."

"You killed her because you loved her?"

"Because I loved her too much. I strangled her, and then made the cuts on her body, hoping that sea creature would be blamed."

While they talked, a rider had overtaken the wagon. Swift saw that it was Pierre, come to fulfill Arnold's orders. "Stop the wagon!" he shouted. "I only want the American."

As Hanson slowed the wagon to a stop, Pierre drew a flintlock pistol from his belt and aimed it at Swift. That was when Hanson acted. For a reason Swift would never fully understand, he threw himself off the wagon seat and onto Pierre just as the pistol fired. Both men hit the ground together, grappling for the gun. Hanson wrenched it away from Pierre and brought it down hard on the bearded man's head. Pierre sagged to one side and didn't move. Only then did Swift realize that the man's single shot had hit Hanson in the chest.

He knelt over the dying farmer, unable to stanch the flow of blood from his wound. "Pierre is dead," he said. "You saved my life."

"Don't—" Hanson gasped. "Don't tell my wife about—"

"I won't," Swift promised.

The city constable was not one to ask too many questions. He recorded the incident as an attempted robbery, and neither Arnold nor Peggy disputed that. When Alexander Swift left St. John for the second time, after attending Hanson's funeral with his widow and children, Arnold was nowhere to be seen.

A few years later Swift learned that Arnold's warehouse had been destroyed in a mysterious fire. He and his family returned to England. By that time, George Washington had taken office as the new nation's first president. Swift asked him about the fire once, but Washington only smiled and said nothing. ●

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Art by Darryl Elliott

The Gift of the Gab

by David Williams

Dona Isabela Mendez moved down the front steps of the hacienda on the arm of her husband. Any waning in her natural beauty was easily compensated by her increasing serenity in maturity. The couple were preparing to greet their important guest as the dusty limousine came to a halt. "My God, he's aged," she uttered quietly as they first caught sight of the single passenger.

"Haven't we all, my dear. Except on you it doesn't show." Don Carlos Romero Mendez was giving a somewhat stiff wave of welcome, and resisting the compulsion to let the hand stay uplifted in a simulated salute. Old habits are easily revived.

The little chauffeur, grey-suited and wearing what appeared to be a parlously sat-upon peaked cap, was soon leaping from his seat to open the rear door of the vehicle. He did give a formal if hasty salute before thrusting his head and shoulders inside, ready to assist the occupant.

But Federico Amanas rejected help. With only a little straining, he levered himself onto the smooth driveway into the waiting arms

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of his hostess. Sweeping off the Panama hat to reveal a still abundant growth of steel-grey hair, he embraced her warmly before extending a hand to her husband. "It's like coming home," he said, straightening his body to its full height, his broad chest filling the well-tailored jacket of the white suit. The slimness of his waist suggested to Mendez, uncharitably, that he might be wearing a corset.

"That's exactly how we want you to feel while you're here, Presidente. At home. With friends," the host now insisted.

"Too kind, too kind," repeated the man who hadn't been president of the country for more than one and a half decades, but who savoured the memory.

"Was the drive from the airport tiresome?" Dona Isabela asked.

"Yes, but it could have been a thousand times more so, and still been worth it to embrace the most enchanting woman in the world." He turned to her again and, smiling, took her hands in his and kissed them both.

"Thank you, Federico. Can I ever have been that?" she questioned lightly, but without hint of protestation. She glanced overtly at her husband, who seemed as flattered by the compliment as she was. The Dona and the ex-president had been clandestine lovers years before, a fact known at the time but studiously ignored by their respective spouses. Amanas's feelings for her then would certainly have supported his present extravagant description. "But your compliments are as beguiling as ever," she went on, their hands still clasped. "So, has the place changed, do you think?"

He looked about him. "Not at all. Such tranquillity."

The Andalusian-style country house, with the matching white church and village below it, was at the head of a subtropical valley lush with vegetation. The sloping vineyards and the flatter farmland beyond had been hewn out of the forest against the backdrop and shelter of the hill ranges on both sides. The hewing had been completed late in the eighteenth century. A previous Carlos Romero Mendez had built the property, which established the present occupant as very "old money." He had been born to inherit a title even grander than Don, but had abandoned it as a sop to

"A rigidly controlled life is the only way I know of writing," says David Williams, who devotes each afternoon from two till seven to the task. The routine has proved effective; he has produced two very well-reviewed series of mystery novels over the years, the more recent Inspector Parry series set in his native Wales. The sixth Parry book is currently in the writing; the five previous books are available in the U.S. on audiocassette. ¶

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democracy when the present government had been elected (after a fashion) sixteen years before this.

Even so, Carlos Mendez owed his way of life to the veneration with which he and his wife were held by the locals—people of mixed South American Indian and Spanish colonial descent. At the start of the bloody coup that had brought in the Amanas regime, Mendez, with other powerful landlords, had accepted high political office, as well as army colonelcies, to bolster the new government's standing. That was why Mendez had then been obliged to live most of the time in the capital eight hundred miles away over the mountains, deserting his country seat and agrarian lifestyle. When a counter, but less sanguinary, revolution had taken place five years later, he had changed to the winning side at the critical moment. Indeed, his astute wife had several times proved singularly adept at choosing such moments for him. After that particular event, again on Dona Isabela's advice, he had abandoned all outward desire to continue in national office, returning to a life of comparative obscurity as a provincial administrator—a largely honorary appointment, except his standing in the community was to serve, once more, to bolster another fresh regime's credibility.

The last change of government had subsequently done little for the country in general, but it had certainly served to protect those who lived under Mendez's immediate protection. This happy issue had a good deal to do with Dona Isabela's conduct during the five years of the previous regime when, unlike her husband, she had been careful to divide her time between the metropolis and their country estate, with the balance favouring the latter. It was her continuing presence in the country that had sustained the old loyalties, whilst her closeness to the then President Amanas had ensured her husband's special place in the government—at least while that government had lasted.

The province in which the Mendez family had lived for centuries was, by general agreement, the most attractive in the land. For a local peasant, the alternative of life as a poor miner in the hills, or as a small holder on the freezing high plains to the north, or, worst of all, as a small freeholder on the low-lying, sweltering desert to the west, would have been purgatory in comparison. And Don Carlos was still powerful enough to protect the locality from bureaucratic encroachment by a faraway central government, as well as from unwelcome infiltration by people from other parts of the country who could upset the balance of the local economy. Altogether, Carlos and Isabela Mendez had done as well for their dependants as they had for themselves.

"We only wish Consuela could be with us, Federico," Dona Isabela offered with a sigh as she linked her arm in her visitor's. And the sentiment she had expressed was quite genuine. The ex-

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president's wife had been a frail, retiring creature, in time past grateful for the sympathetic friendship of her husband's mistresses, of which there had been many more than one. She had been content to provide him with children, to support him loyally in his political career, and eventually to end her days in a Swiss convent hospital.

"Yes, I miss Consuela deeply." This also was true, after the speaker's fashion, though his visits to his wife in hospital had been, to say the least, infrequent. "It's been over a year now, of course. The children are a comfort, yet so scattered about the world. But I have no complaints." He paused, pouting, after this lofty pronouncement, aware that his well-informed companion would know he was living with a twenty-year-old Swedish waitress who had not been considered an appropriate companion for this trip. "The boys have their own families and careers, of course," he continued. "They come to see me often enough. Switzerland suits me, especially for my health and . . . and creature comforts."

"This country, your country, will soon be ready to welcome you back, Presidente," Mendez interposed firmly. In a way, the comparative ease with which the present still very private visit had been arranged supported the statement. The government was in trouble, and the ex-president had a surviving and increasing following in the country. It had been Dona Isabela who, ahead of her husband, had concluded that the current president might soon be prompted to do something drastic—very possibly to resign before inviting Amanas to return as head of a coalition administration. Once again, the two people whose lifestyle would be best protected by such a development would be the Mendezes themselves. And, thanks to the present visit, they would certainly be credited with any initiatives that might stem from it.

For his part, Amanas had no expectation that the last scenario would become a reality—even supposing he would have cooperated in its making. He had ruefully accepted that his leadership capabilities had diminished, particularly his powers of persuasion. He shook his head. "I may be allowed back for a private visit to good friends," he countered philosophically. "But for a longer time? I think not, Carlos. I made a promise, you remember?" He looked across at the other man for a moment with admonition in his expression. It had been his own exile that had enabled Mendez and others to remain. This was the first time that Amanas had revisited the country he had once ruled, and which he had left after agreeing never to return. If the administration had any new role in mind for him, it would need to show its hand fully, and he doubted that Carlos Mendez had a mandate to do that.

"Your promise was made a long time ago, Presidente." Mendez had been embarrassed by the loaded question.

"But not long enough to permit me to return for good," Amanas

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commented, then, without waiting for either of the others to respond, he tactfully dropped the subject. "Well now, this is quite a reception I see you've arranged, my dear friends," he offered with enthusiasm.

A group of servants, stable hands, and field workers was assembled at the top of the steps, around the door. The men were bareheaded and beaming, the women were in Sunday-best peasant dress—with their coquettish little black *chapaca* hats and their colourful long *polleias* skirts. There were murmurs of "Presidente, Presidente" as the three approached, to be greeted by curtsies and low bows.

Yet the little demonstration was somewhat lacking in spontaneity or convincing size. The veteran politician assumed, with grim amusement, that it was meant to offer a token show of how his hosts were defying the official conditions laid down for the visit, which banned his appearing at any indoor or outdoor assembly.

"Good day to you all," he called, fulfilling the role allotted, and lifting his arms in his old style, with hands facing outwards, in a gesture of warm, enfolding appreciation. "Thank you for your welcome. And I see many familiar faces here. Some very old friends." He moved to shake hands with several of those in the group. "Ah, and this is . . . Pedro, isn't it?" He questioned a grizzled, stocky but powerfully built individual whose skin was as pitted and parched as tree bark.

After some hesitation, and a furtive sideways glance at his employer, the man replied. "No, Señor Presidente, it's . . . it's Luca." The gravelled tone had been less apologetic than indifferent, as if he was still prepared to answer to Pedro if that's what the Señor Presidente wanted.

"Luca. Of course it's Luca. I'm sorry. I was thinking of San Pedro because he was a fisherman. You still fish, Luca?"

"Yes, Señor Presidente." He looked again at Don Carlos for sanction. "I think tomorrow, maybe, it's arranged . . ."

"Luca will take you fishing on the lake in the morning," Mendez put in. "That's if it pleases you as much as it used to, Presidente. Your favourite rods have been stored carefully against your expected return. Let's see how you feel in the morning."

"I feel already I'll want to go fishing with Luca in his flat-bottomed boat. It'll be like old times. You still have that boat, Luca?"

"He still has it, yes." Mendez confirmed.

"And still with no motor, because motors frighten the fish?" Amanas joked.

This seemed a little to relax Luca, who stopped nervously moving his fingers along the curled brim of the sombrero he was holding in front of him. "No motor, Señor Presidente. Only two strong oars, and hands and arms to match them." His voice was firmer now, and prouder.

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"Good for you, my friend. Till the morning, then." Nodding and smiling, Amanas moved slowly into the house with his host and hostess.

The lake was small, and twisting. It was a little more than a mile long, and three hundred yards across at its widest point. Thick pine forest sloped down to its edges. The boathouse and landing stage, both visible from the house, were at the bottom of the terraced garden, with a vista of the water beyond until it curved out of sight. For this last reason, a moving boat was soon lost from view from the shore, with the curtain of trees providing a haven of silence as well as privacy. Amanas had always found the lake a blessed retreat.

At his own request, the old head of state had taken a light breakfast at six o'clock, alone in his room, then made his way to the landing stage. Luca, who had arrived there well ahead of him, removed his hat in respectful greeting.

"Good morning, my friend," Amanas called as he came near. "You think the fish will be biting this early, Luca?"

"For you, yes, Señor Presidente. Like always."

The visitor chuckled. "Well, let's hope they don't know I've come down in the world since I last tried to catch them. Thanks, I can manage." He stepped into the solid wooden boat that was square ended as well as flat bottomed—a sturdy construction, longer and wider overall than a large skiff, with metal rowlocks and a seat for the oarsman set just forward of amidships. Across from this was a wide bench for a fly-fishing passenger who could cast from there over the square stern. There was no tiller. It looked to be an unwieldy craft but, as the visitor remembered, it handled well if ponderously. "You know it's more than fifteen years since you and I last did this, Luca?"

The shorter, older man looked up slowly from what he was doing with the boat's painter. "Fifteen years, eight months, and four days, Señor Presidente," he answered stolidly, and with a surprising accuracy which the other took to be a compliment to himself.

"You remember that date as clearly as I do, Luca, I expect for the same bitter reason?" he questioned. "Or was it your birthday, perhaps?" he added affably. After settling himself on the seat, he had opened the small box of coloured artificial flies he had brought with him, and was soon intently choosing a selection to interest the fish.

Luca pushed the boat away from the jetty and arranged his hands on the oars. "I remember for the same reason as you, Señor Presidente. It wasn't my birthday." He let out his breath with undue heaviness before pulling evenly on both oars. "It was the day before the revolution. Before the bloody riots in the capital," he completed.

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"It was indeed. I could hardly forget." Amanas shook his head before looking up. "I left here by helicopter next morning. Even earlier than we are setting off today." He paused because he had returned to studying the contents of the box, not because his memory of events was vague. "But the riots weren't so bloody, you know?" He was now eyeing the green feathered fly he was holding by the base of its slender hook. "And they were over very quickly," he continued. "Once I'd sized up the situation, my aim was to stop unnecessary conflict. The civil unrest was finished that night. The occupation of the central barracks by my President's Guards was against my orders. The men meant well, of course, but their stand was impetuous, and, in the end, unfortunate."

"People were killed, Señor Presidente?"

The words, offered quietly, were nearer a statement than a question, except that Amanas assumed them to be the latter. The conversation ceased for some moments, the only sound coming from the movement of the water and the rocking of the oar handles in the loosely fitted rowlocks. Eventually Amanas looked up from his fishing gear. "People were killed that day, yes. Forty-seven died in the bombardment of the barracks. Some of my most dedicated soldiers, most of them very young. My order to surrender was transmitted too late. Before the shelling was over, I had already signed a settlement with the leaders of the . . . the new government." He had long since ceased referring to them as revolutionaries. "It would have been pointless to do anything else. You see, Luca, I'd always accepted that my regime was to be a transitory one. It was our mission to provide a strong military government for as long as it took to stabilise the country and the economy. Some said we were undemocratic because we weren't elected." He shrugged. "But the people we'd thrown out in the first place were a bunch of crooks. They'd come to power through rigged elections. If that was democracy, God help democracy."

The speaker gave a tolerant smile at his companion, who was pulling hard on the oars with a steady rhythm, and already moving the craft around the first bend in the lake. He sensed that Luca had been unimpressed with his last point, but he was equally sure that the earlier question about the killings all those years ago had been prompted by nothing more than curiosity.

"Except, why should you have known any of that, Luca?" he asked, following up his conjecture. "The corrupt government I sent packing had kept the whole nation ignorant. Of course, we planned to have elections as soon as the country was ready for them." Not that simple folk like Luca would have been interested to know then, and it did little good if they aspired to know now, Amanas mused to himself, wondering why he was troubling to give this unengaged peasant a history lesson.

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"Would it have been another five years before you had the elections, Señor Presidente?" the other man questioned unexpectedly.

"No. Much sooner than that, Luca."

"But they'd been promised in eighteen months from when you came to power."

Before he had spoken, Luca had stopped rowing. He had pulled the oars inboard, and was gently easing a canvas bag out from under his seat. The little vessel was now well beyond observation from the house, and with the oars still, even the lapping of water against the boat's sides had ceased.

"That was a stated intention, not a promise, Luca. As time went on we decided it would have been dangerous to hold elections too soon. It took longer to stabilize the country than we'd hoped." The words had been delivered in a more brusque manner than before, showing that Amanas was tiring of this sterile exchange. "And I doubt what happened during my presidency affected anyone in this oasis of calm and prosperity," he completed more amiably, while making ready to start the fishing.

"But some people here were affected, Señor Presidente," Luca persisted.

Amanas looked up from fingering his fishing rod. "A few people, yes, Luca. As you'll probably remember, Señor Mendez joined me in the government." Though inwardly it wouldn't have surprised him to learn that Luca had been oblivious of even that fact.

"My only son was affected, too," Luca responded stonily.

"Indeed? You never told me you had a son, Luca. What's his name?" It was something that genuinely puzzled Amanas. In times past, the boatman had spoken to him often of daughters, but not of a son.

Luca was ponderously undoing the straps of the bag which was now resting on his lap. "Most people here are too young to know I had a son, señor, and the older ones have forgotten, including Don Carlos." He paused, frowning, before he added, "And even, probably, Dona Isabela. We called our son José. His mother and I quarrelled with him twenty-five years ago. He was nineteen then." The speaker ran a hand across his tanned jaw. "He had taken up with a married woman in the town. Her husband had thrown her out for being unfaithful. She had been one of José's teachers at the school. He learnt literature from her. It was his best subject." He shook his head in either disbelief or bitterness as he continued. "He refused to stop seeing her. Their relationship was becoming common knowledge. He was bringing disgrace to our family. In the end, we disowned him. We never spoke to him again."

"Or spoke of him to others, Luca? To me, for instance? That must have happened just ahead of the time when I started coming here. For those wonderful weekends, escaping from affairs of state."

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"I remember, señor. By then we were very ashamed of our son. But sending him away was something we regretted later. Much later."

"I'm sorry, Luca. Have you made it up with him since?"

There was a breathy grunt. "No, Señor Presidente."

"Was that still because of the . . . this woman?" The whole community was strongly Catholic, and Amanas could understand that a parting in such circumstances could have endured.

"No, señor. One of his sisters found out the slut had left him for someone else. That was a few years later, after they'd gone to live together in the capital. But by that time José had learnt to do without his family."

"Have you ever done anything to heal the rift?"

"No, señor, that was for him to do. To make the first move. His mother and I were agreed on that. But José was stubborn."

Except no more so than his father, perhaps, Amanas mused, wondering whether Luca's wife had been so adamant. This was before he asked: "So what has become of José?"

There was a moment's hesitation before the reply. "He joined the army, señor."

"Was that under the old regime? Before I became president?"

"That's right, señor. He was a bright, intelligent boy. He wanted to be a writer. But he was a doer as well as a scribbler."

"A soldier poet," Amanas offered.

"Perhaps, señor. He did well in the army. Except he despised what you call the old regime."

"I'm glad." Amanas, still seated, was busy attaching the chosen fly to his fishing line.

"Oh yes. You would have been proud of him, señor. When you called for support from the army he was one of the first to lead his men over to your side. He was a sergeant then. Later he became an officer. In your . . . in your loyal President's Guards."

Amanas looked up, his eyebrows raised. "He was in the barracks during the bombardment?"

"Yes, Señor Presidente. He died next day of wounds."

Hurt showed on Amanas's face. For the moment he ceased to be engrossed with the fishing rod. "I'm sorry, Luca, there was . . ."

"We have José's diaries," the old man interrupted boldly. "He kept diaries for the whole time he was a soldier. He called you the country's saviour. He wrote that you'd become better than family for him. Better than father, mother, and sisters. Far better than an unfaithful wife. That's why he gave his life over to you, señor."

"That makes me very proud, Luca."

"Proud, señor?" There was something close to disdain in the tone, but this was too preposterous a possibility to register with Amanas, although he was aware that the speaker's eyes were resolutely—and irksomely—fixed on his own as the words continued.

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"But my son died for nothing. The things he wrote about in his diaries, the things you promised the people, they never happened."

"But I planted the seeds for their future achievement, Luca. It was for others to reap the harvest. As they should have done, of course. The next government . . ."

"The next government has been as bad as yours, and the one before yours. Things are no better now. Too many people have no work. There's still great poverty, except in a few places like this valley. Our schools and hospitals are falling down. There's only money for troops and armaments."

"These things evolve slowly, Luca. And the country needs an army for protection."

"That's what you told my son and his comrades twenty years ago, señor. José believed you spoke nothing but the truth." Luca paused. "But tell me, Señor Presidente, why do we need protection? The people would be better off if we'd been invaded, conquered. All our neighbours are more prosperous than we are. And, in any case, none of them wants to invade us. The protection our government pays for is from the fury of their own people."

"That's an exaggeration, Luca. I'm ashamed to hear you say it, as I'm sure Señor Mendez would be, too. Believe me . . ."

"José believed you, señor, and see what happened to him in the end." This time the interruption had been savage. "If you'd told him the truth he might have left the army and come home to us. His mother and I were sure of that, after we'd read the diaries. You took our son away from us, Señor Presidente. You killed him."

As he had been speaking, Luca had withdrawn a revolver from the bag on his lap. It was a single-action, .45-calibre, six-cylinder Colt. Amanas recognised the model. It could be close to a century old, but there were no apparent signs of age or wear. "I wish you'd put that thing away, old friend," he offered coolly. "I know you're not going to use it, but it could go off by accident and . . . and that's something we'd both regret."

Luca shook his head slowly, and cocked the gun. Then, holding the weapon with both hands, his elbows tight to his sides, he levelled the long barrel so that it pointed toward his companion's heart. His movement of the mechanism had made a click that, in the stillness of the lake and the confines of the boat, was as intrusive as a thunder clap before lightning.

"I am going to kill you, Señor Presidente. On behalf of all the sons who died bringing you to power. Or the other sons who died trying to defend you at the end, like my José."

"Don't be ridiculous, Luca. Shooting me would be like signing your own death warrant. You'd be executed, so what would be the point?" Except the speaker could see the point well enough. He'd already dismissed the first guilty conclusions that had assailed his

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mind. Mendez couldn't have sent him out alone with this motivated madman as revenge for his affair with Isabela. The cuckold had as good as condoned their relationship for his own benefit at the time. And surely Isabela hadn't knowingly put him in this peril because he had dropped her for another woman? She had never been that possessive. It had to be that those two really hadn't known, or had forgotten, the grounds for Luca's obsession—as Luca himself had said. Even so, Amanas was about to be assassinated through their joint stupidity. "And what about your wife?" he uttered desperately. "Think of the shame you'd be bringing on her."

Luca shook his head. "My wife died fourteen years ago, Señor Presidente. She died of a broken heart. And they won't execute me. After I've shot you, I'll kill myself. I'll have nothing else to live for." His hold on the gun tightened. The weight of the weapon had begun to make it waver in front of him.

Amanas's hands moved slowly to grasp the edge of the seat. He was planning to hurl himself forward to the right of Luca, while knocking the gun away to the left. The distance between the two men was scarcely more than four feet—except age and arthritis made the leap seem at least three feet too far. Kicking the gun out of Luca's hands seemed a better proposition, only both Amanas's feet were lodged under the angled wooden stretcher which the rower's legs had been braced against. If the verbal exchange could be prolonged, it was possible Amanas would gradually be able to alter the position of his feet.

"You want to say your prayers, señor?"

The ex-president silently credited God for the intervention, and studied his adversary before he replied. It was in that moment that he hit upon his best strategy, and altered his expression to suggest both penitence and surrender to the inevitable.

"I want . . . I want to make my confession, Luca. You'll allow me that before you take my life?"

"I'm not a priest, señor." The old man looked uncomfortable.

"But what I have to say is far better said to you than to any priest, Luca." The speaker's previously confident demeanour seemed to have completely evaporated. "You deserve to be my executioner, just as I deserve what you are about to do to me." The words came thoughtfully and slowly. "As you say, I was responsible for the death of your son, and the sons of many others. You are right. I made promises, and offered rewards. But the promises were never kept, and the rewards were never enjoyed. Was that my fault? No, it wasn't, but I have always accepted the responsibility even so. People risked everything for me."

"Why wasn't it your fault, señor?" The question had come after a silence of several seconds.

Amanas gave a deep sigh and clasped his hands under his chin

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prayerfully, eyes half closed. "I never knowingly duped my faithful followers. As God is my witness, from my youth up I had pledged myself to lift the yoke from the shoulders of my oppressed countrymen. From those who, like me, had been born into penury and, yes, near slavery, but who, unlike me, had neither the drive nor the chance to create an opportunity to rise above their abominable lot. But I saw my ambition as something that created a chance, not for myself, but for the country. Not that there weren't times when it all seemed likely to fall apart." The speaker hesitated, brow knitting as though he was having difficulty recalling events. "My old father, a dirt farmer on the plain, he struggled all his life to earn enough from the unyielding soil to feed and clothe his family, and most of the time barely even that. He looked very like you, Luca. Very like you," he repeated. "Once, at the beginning, when I was near despair, he grasped me by the shoulders and said: 'We only have one life, Federico. I've wasted mine, lived it to no purpose except to father you. So don't give up now. If you die in the attempt to save our people from perdition, it will be a noble death. If you succeed, God and the nation will bless you.' I remember that well."

The ex-president looked up slowly, a convincing tear coursing down one cheek. "From then onwards I had no fear of death, only a devout belief in my mission, which my father had taught me was more important than any single life, my own included. And later, when it seemed I was going to succeed, I took it at face value that those who had been my enemies, the people's enemies, were ready to change sides, to promise me support because they had come to believe in the same values, of the need to make the same sacrifices. They were powerful men—the biggest landlords, and the owners of the mines and the factories. I believed I'd converted them, Luca, that they were with me. How wrong I was. Because, in the end, they deserted me, as well as your José, and an army of other good men, for their own selfish reasons. Oh, my aims were honest, but because of those greedy people, I failed. For that, for my sins of omission, I have never been punished. There have been times since when the weight of my guilt lay so heavily on me that I aimed to take my own life. Perhaps you find that hard to believe, but I give you my word it's true."

"So what stopped you, señor?" There was no mockery in the voice, but little of conviction, either.

"It was my dear wife. You know she was an invalid? Entirely dependant on me?"

"I didn't know, señor."

There was a scarcely perceptible lift of the other's eyebrows before he responded. "Yes. From soon after we left this country, she was confined to a wheelchair, and later, for a longer time, to her bed. That was until her death last year. We loved each other

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deeply. I was her devoted carer. That became my function. I never resented it, and I never avoided it." He straightened defiantly. "And I wouldn't want you to think I did it as a penance. It was my duty, and, much more than that, it was my selfish desire never to be parted from her. So I don't deserve sympathy from you on her account. It would have been much worse if, like you, I'd lost my wife earlier than I did."

"You had children to mourn with you, señor?"

Amanas grunted bitterly. "As you did, Luca. But did it help that much?" He waited for the other's reply, but since there was none, he continued. "I thought not. And my two sons made their lives in other countries. They were never interested in improving the lot of our fellow countrymen. Not like your José. I wish my death could bring him back to you. I'd give anything for that. In my fight for the presidency and afterwards, in my years of office, my sternest pledge was to make life more fulfilling for our young people. We so nearly achieved it, too. You don't know how close we got. But circumstances were against us. I had hopes for the present government at the beginning. That's why I resigned so quickly, without a real fight. But their leaders soon became less dedicated. If I'd been more resolute, stayed on and opposed them—"

"There would have been more bloodshed, señor."

Amanas nodded sagely. "I believe that's true. But the weight of it all has been too heavy for me over this last lonely year. Again I contemplated suicide, but I was stopped by the church's teaching. Clearly you have made better arrangements with our all-forgiving Lord, but that way was not for me, and not because of cowardice. But this I do know, I shall be more content in the next life than I am now, even if I have to pay a heavy price for sacrificing my life to help my fellow men and failing in the task. So, you see, you are doing me a favour in ending my misery. It's curious that instead of fulfilling your intention, you'll be doing the opposite." Moving aside the padded jacket he was wearing, he began to unbutton his shirt, baring his chest. "Take good aim, my friend. And before God, I forgive you for what you are about to do."

The shot had echoed around the lake, shattering the silence, and rousing birds to flight. The startled Carlos Mendez was breakfasting alone on the terrace. "Who can be shooting on the lake?" he demanded of the maidservant, pushing back his chair. Not that he expected the girl to know or to answer. He was sure that the ex-president had not taken shotguns with him, and, in any case, to Mendez's tutored ear, the explosion had come from a rifle or a handgun. "Run to the kitchen and tell Stefan to meet me at the boathouse. Quickly, girl." Stefan was his valet.

Mendez reached the boathouse first. When Stefan arrived, his

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master was already in the launch wresting the cover off the outboard motor. In moments they were skimming across the lake surface, the noise of the engine loudly heralding their progress.

"There they are, Don Carlos," the young servant pointed as they cleared the first bend.

The flat-bottomed boat was a hundred yards ahead, moving back toward them slowly, almost reverently, the oars dipping gently in the water while making little disturbance to its surface. The only figure visible was that of the oarsman—until the other boat drew alongside.

"Oh, my God," uttered Mendez, horrified at the gruesome sight of the dead man lying in the forward well of the other craft. The head was shattered and bloody where a bullet had reemerged after entering from the other side at close range.

Shipping the oars, their handler had already stepped over the body, and was holding out the painter. "Tow it in with this," he said in a matter-of-fact tone, and very much in control of himself. He handed the rope to Stefan, who seemed more capable of action than his petrified master.

"Yes, Señor Presidente." The man had moved to hold the boats steady while Amanas stepped over into the launch.

"The poor fellow was consumed with remorse at having disowned his dead son," Amanas said to Mendez. "He told me so in detail, then shot himself. I did my best to talk him out of it, but I fear my oratory is . . . is not as persuasive as it used to be." He frowned, but silently consoled himself with the opposite view—while seriously reconsidering his future. ●

A Forensic Scientist Urges Caution

by Stephen D. Rogers

Forensics is a nasty word
Which means don't leave a trace.
The time is past when gloves suffice,
A mask that hides the face.
So if you plan to cross the line
And come back safe and sound,
Then leave your hair and skin at home
Or else you will be found.

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Art by Mark Evan Walker

GROUNDWORK

by Neil Schofield

Mrs. Agravane was at the bedroom window again, looking across the garden at the high wooden fence that separated the garden of their detached house from that of their neighbour, Ralph Dumpton.

"He's doing it again," she said, "and that's the third night in a row." She turned round, peering through the darkness at the large blanket-covered mound that was Mr. Agravane.

"Did you hear what I said?" she said.

"I heard."

"Well?"

"Well *what?*" Mr. Agravane's voice was a groan. "It's three o'clock in the morning, for Christ's sake. Let me get some sleep."

"It doesn't disturb you that your neighbour, the man who lives next door to you, is prowling round his garden *doing things?*"

"Doing things? What things?"

"He's digging. And I'm sure that's not all."

"Digging? How do you know he's digging?"

"I can hear him ever so faintly. And I saw him with a spade."

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"Saw him? But it's pitch black out there."

"He's got a light out there. He's up to something. Something secret."

"Well, I'd say he's doing a hell of a bad job keeping it secret if he's doing it by floodlight."

Mrs. Agravane didn't answer. Mr. Agravane turned over and tried to get back to sleep.

"Henry."

"What, for God's sake?"

"Henry, when was the last time you saw Sheila Dumpton?"

Henry Agravane sat up in bed.

"Simone, I warn you. Don't start."

"Start? Start what? All I asked was when you last saw Sheila Dumpton."

"Yes, and you used exactly that tone the time you asked me if I didn't think that Mr. Smith had a funny accent, which you somehow worked up into him having been a camp guard at Auschwitz. The Black Angel, wasn't it, I seem to remember?"

Mrs. Agravane frowned and sneered in the darkness.

"That man. He simply soft-soaped everyone."

Mr. Agravane switched on the bedside light and lit a cigarette.

"Including the police, a whole tribe of lawyers, and a magistrate. I think, most people think, you got off lightly, Simone. After that, there were the O'Gradys who were apparently running an IRA bomb factory. Then we had the Yugoslav family—what was their damn name—who were counting bombers taking off and then ringing Belgrade. Not to mention the poor devil you definitely saw poisoning jars of baby food in Safeway. Simone, when are you going to stop this?"

"It's people like you that stand by and watch and do nothing while atrocities go on. You'll see. Ralph Dumpton is up to something."

Mr. Agravane sighed, put out his cigarette, put out the light, and lay down, pulling the blankets around his ears.

"He can get up to whatever he likes as long as he doesn't get up to it in here," he said, and went to sleep.

Mrs. Agravane continued to stare across the garden. She talked softly to herself.

"The last time I saw Sheila was last Monday, that's it. She yelled at me because I'd left the Mondeo blocking their gate. Monday.

A new arrival on the short fiction scene, with a 1999 debut in the British anthology *World Wide Writers,* Neil Schofield is already proving to be prolific. This is his third published short story for *EQMM,* and we have several more in inventory. Mr. Schofield combines clever plotting with witty narrative and slightly bizarre situations that stay in a reader's mind long after the last page is turned. ✝

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That's what, eight days? Eight days!"

She thrilled with exquisite horror. Something deliciously awful was going on; she just knew it.

The next evening at about seven o'clock, Ralph Dumpton was washing paintbrushes in white spirit when the doorbell rang.

He sighed, put down the brushes, and walked down the hall to the front door. When he opened it, Simone Agravane was standing on the step.

"Hello, Ralph," she said, and before he could make a move to block her, she was past him and in. He blinked up at her. He was a small man and she was a large woman. She was too big and too blond and he felt very hemmed in standing beside her in the hall. She was carrying a large plant in a large pot.

"I brought this for Sheila," Simone said. "I know she likes plants." Which was a damn lie, as they both knew.

"Very kind," said Ralph. Which was also a damn lie.

She looked at him. He was a small, weedy-looking man, with thinning hair and spectacles. There was nothing at all to him, she thought. A scrawny little thing. His head was too large for her liking, and his eyes too staring and knowing behind those spectacles. Too clever by half, she thought. An accountant. She hated accountants.

Ralph looked at her. He didn't like Mrs. Agravane. She was large, overbearing, and nosey.

"I was thinking only today," she said, "it's such a long time since I saw Sheila, I thought I'd pop round and have a chat."

You lying bitch, Ralph thought.

"She's away," he said.

"Away? Oh."

"Yes," he said. There was a long, dusty silence. Beyond the front door, birds chirruped busily in the garden. A car passed faintly, going far too fast. Clearly, Ralph thought, he was expected to say something else. "At her sister's."

"Oh."

"Illness. In the family. She went to care for her sister's family."

"I see." She was beginning to feel the plant pot becoming very heavy. She hefted it.

"Can I? Could you?" she said.

"Oh yes. In the kitchen for the moment, I think." He led the way down the hall. As they passed the door of the dining room, Mrs. Agravane stopped dead and gasped. The room had been painted in bright scarlet. Walls, ceiling, *and* windows gleamed with a lurid, gory sheen. It hurt the eyes. It looked horrendous. It looked like a waiting room in Hell. Even the floor glowed red through a piece of plastic sheeting. Ralph turned and smiled modestly.

"I've been doing a little redecorating," he said. "Taking advan-

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tage of Sheila's absence. Looks all right, don't you think?"

"Wonderful," she said. "Exquisite." She was looking at him, Ralph decided, as though she thought he might jump at her at any moment and tear her throat out.

They deposited the plant in the kitchen. Mrs. Agravane decided to abandon stage two of her plan, which had been to explore thoroughly the upper floors on the pretext of using the lavatory. She felt she had seen more than enough already.

Ralph saw her to the door.

"I'll tell Sheila you called, when she gets back," he said, "only I'm not at all sure when that's going to be."

Mrs. Agravane bolted down the path to the gate, making an especial mental note of the vast expanse of freshly dug-over soil which stretched from the path right across to the fence between their gardens.

"Been trying to turn the soil over," Ralph explained from the door. "I'm thinking of laying a new lawn. But it's very tough work. Hard ground. I might have to get some help in."

I'll bet, thought Mrs. Agravane.

"Toodle-oo," said Ralph, waggling his fingers at her.

"A room the exact colour of blood," said Simone Agravane later.

"So?" said Henry Agravane. "There's no law against that, is there? Or is there? Perhaps you know something I don't." He was lounging on the sofa, drinking scotch and reading a gardening catalogue.

"And he was extremely shifty when I questioned him on Sheila's whereabouts."

Henry looked at her.

"Simone, even *I* get extremely shifty when you start questioning me. Everybody does."

She ignored this. "And it's just as I thought. He's been digging. He's dug up the whole garden."

Henry considered.

"Let me ask you again, Simone. So?"

She looked at him with disgust.

"Something has happened in that house, Henry, and I don't care what you say."

"Just because you haven't seen Sheila for what—ten days, not even that—just because he's painted a room the colour of blood, and he's been digging in the garden." He stopped and considered. "All right, I admit, it all does seem a little odd, but then people are allowed to be a little odd if they like. It's their right. It's guaranteed by law."

Simone regarded her husband.

"You're not the same man I married, Henry," she said.

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

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"I mean the man I married twenty-seven years ago was a man who couldn't stand injustice and swore to battle against the hidden forces that threaten our lives."

"I swore that? Well, Simone, what you've got now is a man who can't abide fuss and bother and who has sworn to battle against anything that threatens his peace and quiet."

Simone Agravane slammed out of the room.

It was the following day—a Thursday—when Ralph Dumpton was interrupted yet again in the middle of applying a second thick coat of red paint to the walls of his dining room. The doorbell rang. He stopped painting, stared blankly at the red wall, and sighed.

When he opened the door, two young shirt-sleeved policemen were standing on the path looking professionally Noncommittal. They must take special courses in it, he thought.

"Mr. Dumpton?" asked one, the one with the pimples. The other, larger one, who had threateningly short hair, was staring at the garden. In profile, his jaw was distinctly prognathous and his eyes had that moist, white-blue, bulging look Ralph always associated with fat white policemen in South Africa or Mississippi who were filmed beside recently uncovered mass graves looking as though they didn't know what the hell was happening to this world.

"That's me," he said. "What can I do for you?" In television films that usually seemed to be the thing to say.

The problem was knowing what sort of face to pull when you faced policemen. In television films, when someone opened a door wearing that inquiring, slightly puzzled smile, as if he couldn't imagine what in the world these policemen were doing at his door, you just *knew* that at the end of the film *he'd* be the one being led to a police car in handcuffs shouting, "Yes, it was me, and I'm glad I did it, do you hear—glad, glad, glad!"

Ralph Dumpton knew that none of *that* was going to happen, but he kept his face blank anyway.

The pimply policeman said, "Mind if we come inside a moment, Mr. Dumpton?"

The second turned at this, hoisted his equipment-laden belt a little higher on his haunches, and said, "Been doing some digging, then."

"That's right," said Ralph. "I'm going to lay a new lawn."

"Yerss," said the prognathous one, as they stepped into the hall. They looked around them with Professional Alertness, which must also feature heavily in the constabulary curriculum.

"Come through into the kitchen," Ralph said. He led them jangling and rattling down the hall, past the dining room doorway. As they passed it, he heard the pimply one say, "Bloody hellfire." Ralph didn't bother to look round.

The large-jawed one said, "Been doing some painting, then."

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Ralph said over his shoulder, "That's right. Brightening the place up a bit." He led them into the kitchen.

He offered to make them some tea, but they didn't appear to have time for tea. The Jaw-Creature seemed to look for a long time at the refrigerator, but Ralph did not offer them any alternative liquid refreshment.

It took them a long time to come round to what they had come about, it seemed to Ralph. The pimply one whipped out his notebook, and then hawed and hemmed while Jaws toyed with the row of hanging kitchen utensils. He appeared particularly taken with a garlic press.

There had been, said Pimples, referring to his notes, some inquietude about Mrs. Dumpton.

"Inquietude?" said Ralph. "I'm not sure I'm familiar with the word."

The word apparently meant people were worried.

"But," said Ralph, "my wife is away."

"Where?" the pimply one wanted to know.

"She's gone to her mother's," said Ralph. "She's been under a bit of a strain recently, and she decided to take a few days away."

"Nine days," pointed out the large policeman, trying out the garlic press on his thumb. "And the last time you spoke to her was when?"

Ralph thought for a long moment. "I can't recall," he said.

"Have you got a telephone number for the mother of Mrs. Dumpton?"

Ralph said that yes, he did have the number of the telephone of the mother of Mrs. Dumpton, thank you.

The large policeman jangled impatiently as he examined the inside of the garlic press, presumably for traces of human tissue.

Ralph said, "Oh, you mean, you want it?"

Yes, that's what they wanted. And Ralph gave it to them. Pimples made some notes. Then he said, "Thank you for your cooperation, Mr. Dumpton."

"I have to say," said Ralph, blinking ferociously through his glasses, "that I find this all rather ridiculous. Can I ask who has been feeling this so-called inquietude? About Mrs. Dumpton?"

They said they were sure that Mr. Dumpton would not want them to betray a confidence. Anyway, said Cro-Magnon Man, it had been an amomynous call.

Pimples said, "I'm sure you have nothing to worry about, Mr. Dumpton. You know what people are like. But we have to explore every avenue, I'm sure you'd agree. It's in your all interests. In *all your* interests."

Ralph agreed and thanked God in their presence for an alert professional policing authority. They, in return, gave him a leaflet entitled "Don't Try to *Knock* Him Out—*Lock* Him Out!!"—an

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interesting tract on the necessity for warding the burglar off rather than trying to lay him low once he was on the premises.

They left. The large one strolled around the garden path, eyeing the dug-over garden and nodding with immense approval. Ralph caught sight of Mrs. Agravane in her bedroom window just before she ducked out of sight. He waved the policemen off in their smart car.

The next day—a Friday—Ralph Dumpton was busy washing up after his frugal lunch when the doorbell rang. He sighed, dried his hands, put on his glasses, and went to the door.

This time, it was a dumpy, raincoat-clad, behatted detective inspector, furnished with a group of sergeants and constables, who were inspecting the dug-over garden with a professional eye. Beyond the garden wall, Ralph could see a number of police cars drawn inconspicuously into a semicircle. To ward off, he supposed, hostile attacks by the natives. He could see some overweight natives hovering at the end of their drives across the avenue. They didn't look as though they were about to mount a hostile attack. They didn't look as if they knew *what* to do.

The detective inspector told Ralph his name was Cobb, which Ralph had no reason to challenge since the statement was accompanied by a warrant card.

"Would you mind very much if several of us came in, Mr. Dumpton?" said Detective Inspector Cobb.

"Come through into the kitchen," said Ralph, "I've been doing some work on the house and there's a bit of a mess."

He led several of them down the hall to the kitchen. As they passed the dining room doorway he heard one of the accompanying sergeants say, "Seen this, sir?"

Inspector Cobb did not speak until he and Ralph were seated at the kitchen table, facing one another. Inspector Cobb had a broad, fleshy face with a nose like a young avocado, and Ralph felt that if Inspector Cobb had said, "Come on, my old son, we know everything. Cough up," he would have buried his head in Inspector Cobb's meaty, fatherly, raincoated shoulder and sobbed out everything. But there was nothing *to* sob out and so instead he gazed, entranced, through his spectacles at Inspector Cobb and listened.

Inspector Cobb said, "Mr. Dumpton. You don't mind if I call you Mr. Dumpton, do you? Good. We seem to have what we in the force term, in our scatty, muddled fashion, a little problem."

"Ah," said Ralph. There seemed to be no other comment possible.

"Yes. Mr. Dumpton, can you tell me, just for the record, where your wife is?"

Ralph blinked. "She's at her sister's. Mother's."

Inspector Cobb grimaced.

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"Yes. Well, there we are, you see. That's what I call a little problem. Is Mrs. Dumpton at her mother's or her sister's?"

"Well, I'm not sure."

"You're not sure? Didn't Mrs. Dumpton confide in you before she left?"

"No. She goes off sometimes like that. She doesn't always tell me where she's going."

Detective Inspector Cobb looked at him seriously.

"And when exactly did Mrs. Dumpton leave?"

"Friday before last. Saturday. I can't remember."

"Hmmm. You don't seem sure of very much where Mrs. Dumpton is concerned. You see, the trouble is that we took the liberty of telephoning Mrs. Haliburton—Mrs. Dumpton's mother—"

"Yes, I know my mother-in-law's name, thank you."

"I'm sure you do. According to Mrs. Haliburton, she hasn't seen hide nor hair of your wife for three years. They haven't even spoken. Some trouble over six sherry glasses, apparently, I couldn't make head nor tail of it."

Ralph looked uncertainly at the inspector.

"I'm not sure you have the right to do that," he said.

"Well, Mr. Dumpton, there do seem to be widespread concerns over your wife's whereabouts and well-being. And where there are concerns, we do our best to quiet them discreetly and inconspicuously."

"I think you take too much on yourselves."

"Possibly. However, if and when Mrs. Dumpton is found, there's no harm done, is there? And at the moment we have real concerns for Mrs. Dumpton's well-being. You see, we also took the liberty of ringing Mrs. Dumpton's sister in Bexhill, a Mrs.—" He looked sideways at a sergeant.

"Mrs. Pratley, sir."

"Mrs. Pratley, that's right. Well, imagine our surprise when Mrs. Pratley also denied having seen or spoken to Mrs. Dumpton for, what was it—five years. Even longer than her mother. I must say, good relations don't seem too common in your wife's family, Mr. Dumpton. This time it was a quarrel over some wedding presents."

Ralph smiled thinly.

"They're not an easy family, it's true."

"So, Mrs. Dumpton isn't with her mother, and she isn't with her sister, and in view of the bad blood that seems to stream through their family, it was very unlikely that she'd be with either. So, Mr. Dumpton, you see our little problem? We have a lady who seems to be wandering about in the undergrowth somewhere and no one, including her husband, seems to know where."

Ralph thought for a moment.

"She goes off sometimes."

"Now that, if I might say so, Mr. Dumpton, is what I'd call a

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vague comment. 'She goes off sometimes.' To be brutally frank, it's not enough. Mrs. Dumpton might be injured somewhere, hit by a car. She might be amnesic in a hospital. She might be abducted—it's been known. She might be—well, she might be anywhere. Mr. Dumpton—wouldn't you like to know? And if not, why not? In your situation, I'd want to know."

Ralph shrugged. "She goes off. She comes back. I never know when."

Inspector Cobb rubbed his jaw with a heavy hand.

"Mr. Dumpton, what I'd like to do, with your permission, is to invite you down to the station to give us a complete description of Mrs. Dumpton, plus all the other details that might be of some use: when she left, what time, and how—that sort of thing."

Ralph shifted uneasily.

"I don't know. Shouldn't I ring my lawyer?"

Inspector Cobb's eyes opened wide.

"Whatever for, Mr. Dumpton? All we're asking you to do is to give us some help. That's not too much to ask, is it? Aren't you concerned about your wife?"

"No. She goes off sometimes."

"Right. Well, all I'd like to be sure of is that she's in a fit condition to come back. Also with your permission, I'd like to leave an officer here. You know, just in case Mrs. Dumpton arrives back unexpectedly."

Ralph shrugged his thin shoulders again.

"I can't see what all the fuss is about."

"Fuss? There's no fuss. We don't *want* any fuss, Mr. Dumpton. All we want to be sure of is that no harm has come to a poor, harmless, defenceless woman."

At that, for some reason, Ralph smiled and kept on smiling.

Later, while Ralph was sitting in the interview room with a plastic cup of tea and a watchful police constable, Inspector Cobb spoke to his superior.

"I just don't know about this one," he said, accepting a glass of the superintendent's whisky. "He's a strange one, sir, and there's no denying it."

"Run me through it again, Bert." The superintendent settled back in his chair.

"Anonymous call from a neighbour to say that Dumpton's wife hadn't been seen for eight days. I say anonymous, but we're pretty sure it was the Agravane woman, who happens to live right next door."

"Agravane? Wasn't that the silly cow—"

Inspector Cobb nodded wearily.

"She's the one. Normally, I wouldn't pay attention to anything

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that daft bitch says. In my opinion, she's next door to being off her head. But two of the lads step round anyway to have a look. Sure enough, she's not there. Dumpton says that she's at her mother's. They get the telephone number. Now, the strange thing is that he apparently told our anonymous caller she was at her sister's. She's at neither. We checked."

"What else have you got?"

"Anonymous caller says he's been digging up the garden late at night."

The chief super grunted. "Not a capital crime."

"True. But the garden *has* been dug over recently. All of it. And then. And then, he's gone and painted his dining room red."

"What?"

"Bright red. Walls, ceiling, and floor. Even the windows. Bright, bright red. It looks like nothing on earth, I can tell you. Put the wind up all of us."

The chief superintendent was sitting up straight.

"That *is* interesting. So what's his version?"

"All he says is that she goes off. She goes off sometimes and then she comes back. But he doesn't know when or how she left. Taxi, bus, train. He's completely in the dark. We're checking buses and taxi companies and the railway station and so on. But . . ."

The chief superintendent leaned back. "What's your instinct say, Bert?"

Cobb considered for a little while.

"I'd say there's a funny smell about it. Yes, definitely a funny smell."

The chief super nodded. "In my experience, if there's a funny smell somewhere, as like as not it means you've stepped in something nasty. And I don't want anything like that Godley business happening on our patch."

The chief superintendent woke up every morning thanking God that Albert Godley had lived in another unfortunate police area and not in his. Albert Godley, an unemployed abattoir worker, had killed his wife for reasons too numerous to list, and had divided her into conveniently sized chunks which he then mailed to a variety of world leaders including Slobodan Milosevic and the Pope. At the trial, his only explanation for this odd behaviour was that, before her sudden death, his poor wife had frequently expressed a strong desire to travel. The whole sorry business had been compounded by a number of police blunders, including the fact that two constables, alerted to strange goings-on, had gone round and had been greeted by Godley in a bloodstained apron and holding a saw. They had been satisfied by his explanation that he was butchering a pig for a friend. He had offered them a half-leg of pork for their trouble. They had declined.

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The chief superintendent shuddered slightly at the thought of Albert Godley and the many and messy police resignations he had provoked.

"What do you want, Bert?"

"I want a search warrant. I want his place looked at from top to bottom. I want Forensic to have a look at some paint scrapings from that room, to see just what, if anything, is underneath the paint besides more paint. And I want to have that garden up."

"You're going to hang on to him? Course, you don't *have* to charge him yet. But I would have thought he might be getting a bit edgy."

"There's no problem there, strangely. He's not shouting for his lawyer. Seems happy enough to help us with our enquiries. Not very bright, I'd say. I'll keep him late and then offer him a cell bed for the night."

"Right. I'm going to talk to upstairs. You can have anything you want. Don't worry, there won't be any problems. And if you have to charge him, then charge him. You'll think of something. We'll sort out any problems afterwards."

The superintendent and Inspector Cobb finished their whisky with the serious and satisfied air of men who knew where their duty lay. *And* where their backs lay and how to cover them.

Simone Agravane was thrilled to bits at the activities next door. What a night! Even now, at six o'clock in the morning, there were still lights on in Ralph Dumpton's house; people were moving about purposefully and there were the sounds of Boot on floor.

"They're digging in the garden as well," she said to Henry Agravane.

"Good for them."

"But I can't see a thing. It's very irritating."

True enough, a large blue tarpaulin had been erected over the Dumpton garden to protect the site from the gaze of the prying and over-curious. Beneath it, a squad of sweating and cursing police constables were prodding the earth with long iron rods and digging wherever they sensed resistance.

"I told you he was up to something," she said, "and there you are, it's true."

"Go to sleep, Simone."

But Simone Agravane didn't. It was far too exciting.

Ralph Dumpton was in the interview room with Inspector Cobb. He had had a refreshing sleep in one of the station cells, had shaved and changed into a clean shirt which a thoughtful police sergeant had brought down from his house. He was eating bacon and fried bread and drinking a large mug of tea. Cobb leaned against the wall and watched him.

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Ralph looked up.

"Are you going to charge me with something, Mr. Cobb?" he asked. "Because if you are, I really ought to know, so that I can make arrangements."

Cobb smiled and spread his hands.

"Ralph," he said, "there's no question of charging you." *Not yet,* he thought. "We're simply asking you to cooperate with us. You must admit that the situation *is* very odd and that we *do* have legitimate cause for concern."

Ralph swallowed and nodded understandingly.

"For my wife's whereabouts and safety."

Cobb nodded. "And of course, you are free to go whenever you like." *Just try it.*

"No. I rather like it here, as a matter of fact. Helping you with your enquiries."

Cobb was really beginning to dislike Ralph Dumpton. He was getting tired of that thin, clever little face, of that innocent, bespectacled gaze, and that lack of any kind of panic, fear, or even discomfort. Either he was too clever for his own good or he was as thick as two planks. But, as sure as anything, there was *something.* Cobb could smell it. Something wrong.

He was going to have this one.

There was a tap at the door and a constable entered. He whispered something in Cobb's ear. Ralph, washing down the last bites of fried bread with a swallow of tea, watched the change that came over Inspector Cobb's face.

"Right," said Cobb, "finished your nice breakfast? Everything to your satisfaction, I hope? Good. Then get your jacket and come with me."

"Where?" asked Ralph.

"You'll see."

There was bright sunshine and all hell breaking loose at the Dumpton house when Inspector Cobb and Ralph were driven up to the gate.

Two uniformed constables tottered out, carrying a folded-up tarpaulin, followed by a sergeant, who came over and spoke through the window.

"It's her, sir." His voice was shaky. "There's no doubt about that." From behind him, they could hear a voice. Or rather, a Voice. It was Loud. And it had a shrill, grating tone within it, like an electric drill that had just hit a piece of schist in a wall.

Cobb said, "This is Mr. Dumpton." The sergeant looked at him with curiosity and sympathy.

"Is she always like that?"

Ralph shrugged. "Mostly," he said.

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The sergeant said to Cobb, "If you don't mind, I'm going to get these lads away, sir, they're starting to crack. We've put everything back as near as dammit as it was, Mr. Dumpton," he said to Ralph.

Cobb opened the car door. He turned to Ralph. "Come on."

When they entered the gate, four ashen-faced policemen were filling in holes in the dug-over garden as rapidly as they could, seeing that the holes were really quite deep. In front of them, watching them, was a smallish blond woman, wearing a tight maroon suit. She was talking to them in *that* voice, describing, in appalling detail, their parentage, their habits, their appearance. Her language was just terrible. Cobb hadn't heard anything like it since his army days and a particularly vile drill sergeant.

Cobb said in a soft monotone, "Dear, oh dear, oh my good God. That's her, is it?"

Ralph nodded. Just at that moment the small blond woman caught sight of Simone Agravane at her window and unleashed a barrage of abuse which made everyone blench, including Inspector Cobb. One of the constables seemed ready to faint. She strode up to the garden fence and finished off, "AND DON'T LET ME SEE YOUR ROTTEN, UGLY, PRYING FACE LOOKING INTO MY GARDEN AGAIN, YOU PARROT-FACED COW! BECAUSE IF I DO, I'LL HAVE YOUR TRIPES OUT AND NAIL THEM TO THIS FENCE!"

Simone Agravane, quite sensibly, decided to leave the window. Mrs. Dumpton turned and saw Ralph and Inspector Cobb.

"SO YOU'RE BACK, ARE YOU, YOU USELESS LITTLE SWINE? WELL, ABOUT DAMN TIME, TOO. I WANT TO KNOW WHAT'S BEEN GOING ON."

It wasn't so much the volume, Cobb decided, although there was plenty of that. It was the high, grating, abrasive quality of the voice that hit you. He thought it was the worst sound he had ever heard in his life. He advanced tentatively. To his horror, she turned on him.

"AND JUST WHAT'S *YOUR* PART IN ALL THIS, FATTY?"

Cobb looked at the thin little face, the piercing blue eyes, and the peaked mouth that faced him and decided that although this awful woman didn't come up to his shoulders, and weighed half of what he did, he was frightened to death of her.

"Mrs. Dumpton," he began, but he never got to finish. He told himself several times during the next five or ten minutes that he was within his rights to arrest her for affray, or for breach of the peace, or for treating an officer with contumely, or disorderly behaviour, or *something,* but he also realized that he would never dare. Behind him, he could hear the remaining constables, having filled in their holes and patted down the earth, retreating on tiptoe to the gate. Ralph stood beside him, simply listening. At one point during the blistering, often obscene tirade, Cobb sneaked a

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look and there was a dreamy smile on Ralph's face.

Despite his best efforts, it just went on and on. Cobb felt as though he was trapped in amber. The last bit was particularly vitriolic and ranged back and forth on the failings of a BLUNDERING, STUPID, UNDER-GIFTED, SO-CALLED POLICE FORCE WHO COULDN'T FIND THEIR OWN BOTTTOMS, NOT EVEN WITH THE AID OF BOTH HANDS AND A TORCH. THAT SHE, MRS. DUMPTON, WOULD GO AWAY WHEN SHE LIKED, WHERE SHE LIKED, AND FOR AS LONG AS SHE LIKED, AND SHE MIGHT POSSIBLY GO AWAY AGAIN TONIGHT AND WHAT WAS THAT TO HIM, TURNIP-NOSED LITTLE BASTARD, AND IF HE EVER SO MUCH AS SET FOOT ON THEIR PROPERTY AGAIN, SHE'D HAVE HIS BADGE AND HIS JOB, AND HIS TEETH FOR CASTANETS. WAS THAT CLEARLY UNDERSTOOD?

At last, at long, long last, the horrible noise stopped. The wasp-waisted little blond figure teetered up the path on her stiletto heels and went into the house. There was a long pause. A lone, brave sparrow chirped tentatively into the silence that had fallen in the garden. Cobb pushed his hat back on his head, let out a long, quivering breath, and looked at Ralph. Ralph smiled.

"I told you. She goes off sometimes. The trouble is, she keeps on coming back."

Inspector Cobb put a heavy hand on Ralph's shoulder and walked him towards, but not *to,* the open front door.

"Ralph, all I can say is, you have my apologies. My deepest sympathy. And my prayers. How on earth—?"

"How on earth do I put up with it?" Ralph finished for him. "Well, it's a question of what you're used to, I suppose."

"In all my years on the force—and I've seen a few things, Ralph, I can tell you—I've never experienced anything like that."

Ralph shrugged. He could hear Sheila clattering about in the house behind him as he watched Inspector Cobb walk away down the path.

Cobb turned and said, "You never know, Ralph. Perhaps someday she won't come back."

Then he went on his way.

A particularly courageous constable, who had drawn the short straw, ran up the path to return Ralph's shovel, which they had taken by accident, and then ran away again. Ralph stood on the doorstep holding the shovel and waving goodbye to Inspector Cobb and his merry men. He looked across the garden to see if Mrs. Agravane was watching, but he could see no sign of her at the windows.

Mrs. Agravane, he mused, was beyond price. The neighbour from hell was a gift from heaven. He had known he could count on her. All you had to do was wind her up and watch her go.

Behind him, he heard Sheila's stiletto heels clacking in the hall,

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and then the unmistakable sound of the dining room door opening. He stepped inside and closed the front door.

"WHAT IN THE HELL?—RALPH!" Ah, she had entered the Red Room.

He began to walk slowly down the hall, thinking about Mrs. Agravane and how she had done her job just marvellously. No one would bother him from now on. For all the police cared, he thought, he could hold a weekly Black Mass and Barbecue complete with Carnival Novelties and Human Sacrifice. (Family Parties Welcomed.)

"RALPH! GET IN HERE!"

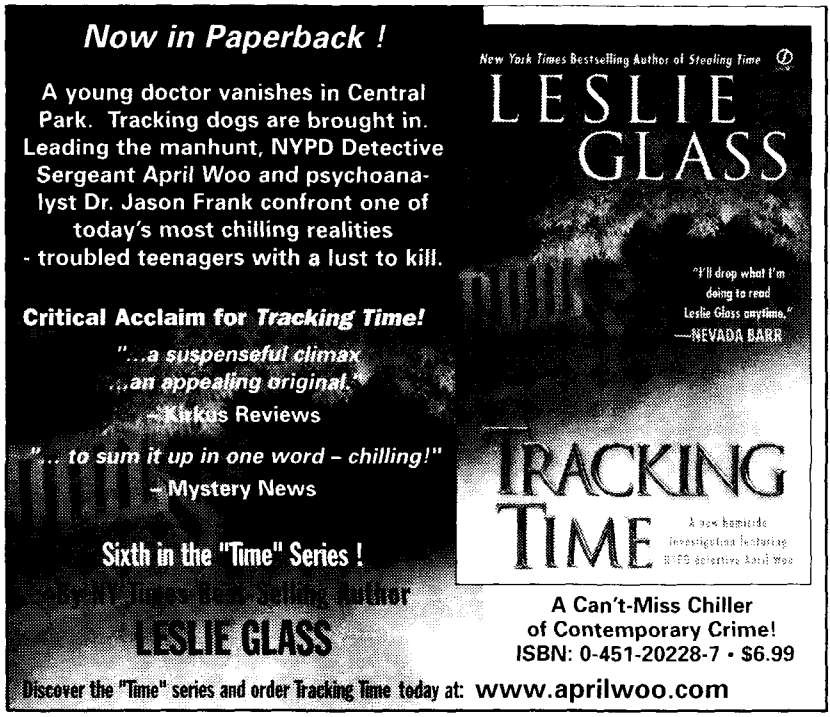
He *had* counted on Mrs. Agravane, but he hadn't counted on the police turning over the garden so thoroughly. That was a splendid bonus. It would be terribly easy to dig. He sighed happily. Mrs. Agravane and the police had prepared the ground beautifully for him. And tomorrow he would order the turf for his new lawn.

He went into the Red Room and noticed with pleasure that Sheila was standing considerately in the *exact* centre of the plastic sheeting.

"WHAT IN GOD'S NAME HAS BEEN GOING ON? AND WHAT ON EARTH IS THAT DIRTY SHOVEL DOING IN THE HOUSE?"

He closed the door.

Now. ●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INTO THE VELVET NIGHT

by Raymond Steiber

It was my wife who spotted the open window. We were on our way from nowhere to nowhere, and by that time I was hoping that a cop would stop us just so we could sit down. When you're on the run, it's not like it is in the movies—all filled with energy and endless determination. You're tired and you're scared and any way it's over begins to seem like a good way.

The open window was in the back of a show house, the first house they build in a new development, close to the entrance, and the last one they sell. I climbed in first, then helped Kim in behind me. As I closed my arms around her, I thought about all the glamorous couples on the run in the movies: Mel Gibson and Goldie Hawn in *Bird on a Wire,* a stinker, and Robert Donat and Madeleine Carroll in *The Thirty-Nine Steps,* first class. Well, that wasn't us. Kim was plump and forty-three, and I was an ex-high school athlete gone the way of all ex-high school athletes.

A journalist sleuth falls in-between the headings "amateur" and "professional" used to classify fictional detectives. As Barbara Haugen says in an article for *Mystery Readers Journal:* "Investigation is part of a reporter's job, whether it is into a political campaign or into murder. . . . A reporter can accomplish more without police than the average citizen." In that sense the reporter is a pro; but still he has no legal role, and he may even become the object of a police hunt, as in this new story. ¶

"Maybe they'll get somebody svelte to play us in the movie version," I muttered.

"Oh, shut up, Sam."

"Jennifer Aniston for you and Pierce Brosnan for me."

"You're not being funny."

"I'm not trying to be—those are probably the bitterest words I've said in my life. Let's look the joint over."

The developers had set up an office in the front room. Colorful house-plan brochures were scattered across the top of a desk, and there were a couple of client chairs. Whoever manned the place

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during the day had installed a coffee maker in the kitchen and even left half a bag of bagels behind.

We didn't dare switch on the lights, but there was enough light from the street lamps to see our way around. We cranked up the coffee maker. We ate two of the three remaining bagels, holding one back to split for breakfast. Then we stripped the cushions from the chairs and made ourselves a nest in one of the back bedrooms.

We were both exhausted, and as we lay there Kim began to cry from a combination of weariness and despair. I held her till she fell asleep. Then I slept, too, or rather slept-woke, slept-woke with every creak of the house.

We need to get out of here early, I thought, before the developers arrive. But what time would that be? Maybe not till nine or ten o'clock.

Sometime during the night I had my bright idea. Or maybe not so much bright as desperate. I told Kim about it when she woke at first light.

"He'll be at the governor's reception tonight," I said.

"What good does that do us?"

"We can confront him there. Maybe even grab him and bring him back here and force the truth out of him."

"Look at us, Sam. Look at our clothes. How are we ever going to get into the reception?"

I didn't know. I didn't have any idea.

Then Kim seemed to brighten up. "Caterers," she said. "There'll be caterers."

And went off to the bathroom of our borrowed home for a soapless wash.

It started this way: with a professional hockey team called the Blazers and a disgruntled sportswriter. Me.

For seventy years the Blazers had been the pride of a medium-size industrial city in Canada. Their fans had filled the arena for every home game and tuned out everything else to follow their exploits on TV. The local kids donned Blazer jerseys to whack pucks around frozen lakes and dreamed of wearing the real ones. Like other great Canadian players had. Like Gordie Howe had, once, for a time.

The Blazers were as much a part of that town's bloodstream as the wintry plains that surrounded it, as the modest demeanor of its mainly working-class inhabitants, as the soil beneath their feet.

So naturally the first thing that happened when new management took over was that they moved the team to a city in the U.S.

Hey, that sunbelt boomtown—*my* town—had a bigger market than the whole of Central Canada. Also, the city fathers were so anxious to land a professional sports franchise—*any* franchise—

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that they'd do anything, even put the taxpayers in hock for thirty years to build a new state-of-the-art arena. I mean, unless you had a pro sports team, how could you call yourself a major-league city?

Never mind that the average local's idea of winter sports was jogging in January with a jacket on. A *light* jacket. And then only because you were doing it early in the morning. And never mind that you were breaking the hearts of a bunch of Canadians who'd grown up with the team. After all, you can't make an omelet without first stealing a couple of eggs.

When she saw the price tag for the new arena, Kim said: "Our property taxes are gonna go through the roof, Sam."

Then promptly went to work for Sunbelt Sports Authority, the quasi-governmental outfit that was supposed to build, then manage, the arena.

Kim's an accountant, and her job was to be an all-purpose number cruncher.

After she'd worked there six months, she came home one night and said: "Something funny's going on, Sam."

My ears perked up. I worked for the *Sun,* and the words "something funny" were like a whiff of Wild Turkey to an alcoholic.

"What is it?" I asked.

"I don't know, but I bet I find out."

More months passed. We drove up to the state university to visit our daughter KimberlyAnn (why is it that normal, reasonably intelligent parents—like Kim and me—come up with such screwy names for our kids?). On the drive back, Kim opened up on the subject of the Sports Authority again. Things didn't add up there. Or to be more accurate, they added up too well but in the wrong direction.

"Ever hear of Butkus, Whey, and Lafferty, Sam?"

"It sounds like an Irish-Latvian jug band."

"They're a consulting firm up in the state capital. What about Whey and Carmichael?"

"Another consulting firm?"

"They're a materials testing outfit. In Longdale."

"That's up near the state capital, too."

"Then there's Lafferty Associates. I don't know what they do, but about every six months they send in a fat report that nobody ever looks at. But I looked at one, Sam, and it was about traffic planning."

"Sports arenas need to plan for traffic."

"Do they need to plan for *air* traffic? Somebody went to the library at a university somewhere, or to the state archives. They pulled out a report that had the word 'traffic' in the title, gave it a new front page and a new binding, and sent it in to the Sports Authority. Whereupon the Sports Authority paid them two hundred and forty thousand dollars. I know because I logged in the canceled check. And these other outfits, all of which seem to be run by the

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same people—well, to date, they've collected over a million and a half dollars, and as far as I can tell, they haven't done anything."

Bells and whistles went off in my head. A big-time scam, and my own wife had dropped it in my lap free of charge.

About a year ago the paper had moved me out of sports and put me to work on a new section called Input. Input was all about computer stuff. It was supposed to attract the readership of the young professionals who worked at the new high-tech firms out in the valley. But these were people who thought *Press Enter* was a compound sentence. They called pictures graphics. And as for newspapers, they were something left over from the dim, distant past—the 1980s, say.

Aargh! I hated Input. I'd been on the sports page since I'd graduated from college, and I'd planned on staying there till they carted me away to the mortuary. But now I was writing about fast modems and Linux applications.

But if I could dig out the dirty on a hot arena scandal, I could write my own ticket. Get back into sports and maybe even wangle my own column.

I said: "Write down the names of these outfits. Get their mailing addresses, too."

"Do you think you can find out anything?"

"We newspapermen have our methods," I replied. That is, *real* newspapermen had their methods. Old sportswriters like me had to improvize.

I tracked down the addresses Kim got for me. Butkus, Whey, and Lafferty was an empty office on the first floor of a delapidated building around the corner from the state capitol. Well, not completely empty. When I peered through the grimy window, I saw an old metal desk with a couple of drawers hanging open, a bookcase with no books, and, in a corner, something that looked like a dead mouse.

I should've taken the dead mouse as a portent.

Whey and Carmichael was an abandoned gas station on the outskirts of Longdale. But, strangely enough, it had a brand-new mailbox outside.

Lafferty Associates used one of those commercial mail-drop outfits, and nobody who worked there could tell me a thing about them.

I asked Kim to make Xerox copies of the canceled checks. The backs were all stamped *For Deposit, Security Banking & Trust.* All these outfits used the same bank, in other words. Probably the same bank account, too, I thought.

I dragged out a capital phone book and began calling all the Carmichaels, Wheys, Laffertys, and Butkuses I could find. There were six Carmichaels, one Whey, three Laffertys, and two Butkuses. Uninformative answering machines greeted all my calls but the second to last Butkus. A female voice answered that one.

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"I'd like to speak to Mr. Butkus, please," I said. Although why I assumed the Butkus I was looking for was a male, I don't know.

"If you mean the loser that used to be my husband, why don't you try calling *his* number? Not that he'll be there—he'll be out playing grab-ass with the governor somewhere."

Blastoff. Nuclear fission.

I went looking for Harvey Berger, the guy who does most of our state political reporting. I found him clearing out his desk.

"Where are *you* going?"

"Haven't you heard? I got offered a *real* job with an outfit in Salt Lake City that doesn't put out newspapers."

"You'll be back."

"Don't count on it. This is a high-tech company and they offer *stock* options."

"Ever hear of a guy called Butkus?"

"*Fred* Butkus? Sure. He's an asshole buddy of Affable Al Dooley, our three-term governor. No official position, but he does all the governor's dirty work."

I trotted out the other names.

"Whey, I never heard of. Carmichael might be the husband of the governor's favorite niece, and I think Lafferty's Carmichael's brother-in-law. What's this all about?"

I gave him a sketch of what Kim and I had learned. At which point Berger almost unpacked his stuff and went to beg for his job back—just so he could cover it. Then he remembered that his wife would kill him and decided against it. But he did sit down and stoke up his trusty computer.

"What was the name of that bank where the checks were cashed?"

"Security Banking and Trust."

"Yeah, I thought it struck a bell. That's the outfit that handles the governor's campaign money. Let's look at the contributor list for his reelection fund."

And out popped Butkus, Whey, and Lafferty, Lafferty Associates, and Whey and Carmichael. Plus each of those people as individuals. Plus their wives and children and who knew how many others whose names we didn't recognize. And each of them contributing the limit the law allowed.

"The governor played a major role in snagging that hockey franchise," Harvey said. "And also in setting up the deal that stuck the taxpayers with all the costs. I guess this is the payoff for him and his pals."

"I see how Butkus and all those others benefit, but what does the governor get out of it—besides campaign contributions, I mean? Of course, maybe that's enough."

"You don't understand how the campaign laws work in this

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state. What few we have, that is. Whatever money is left over in the war chest after the election, Affable Al gets to keep."

"You mean, *pocket?*"

"Ain't politics wonderful? And Affable Al always has money left over. He gets elected so easily by the rednecks downstate and the boomers in the cities that you'd think he was alternatively giving away pickup trucks and SUVs. So his campaign fund's the perfect vehicle for laundering kickbacks. Call it his personal retirement account. The minute he leaves public office, he gets to walk off with what's in the war chest. And in the meantime, he gets to spend a lot of it on personal expenses that he calls something else. Car leases. Luxury suites at hotels. You name it. Sam, your eyeballs are rolling around in your head."

"Oh Mama—I think I just hit the jackpot."

"Not yet—you still got a lot of work to do on this story."

Then he sat me down and outlined a plan of attack. It was the best half-hour session I'd ever had on the art of reporting.

"One thing," he finished, "don't go to the editor with this thing till you got it all nailed down and ready to write. He'll freeze you right out and turn it over to Alison and Keith. Alison's his golden girl and Keith's the best straight-ahead reporter on the paper."

I stumbled out of there and began assembling a file. I borrowed a camera and drove up to the state capital one Saturday and took dozens of shots of the empty office with the dead mouse, the abandoned gas station, the mail drop. I began connecting the dots between the governor and Carmichael, Whey, Lafferty, and Butkus. And in the end I saw that there was one piece missing, and that piece was Jake Lumley, the president of the Sports Authority.

I discussed it with Kim one night.

"I got to talk to him, Kim. He's the key."

"A month ago I would've told you that you'd be wasting your time, but lately he's been acting as if he's about to come undone."

"Do you have a lot of contact with him?"

"He confides in me sometimes—because we went to the same high school and we're about the same age. In fact, he tried to hit on me once."

"He did *what?*"

"Sam, he tries to hit on *every*body. If Mother Teresa was still alive and she showed up at the office, he'd try to hit on *her.* To tell the truth, I would've felt insulted if he hadn't. Like there was something really wrong with me."

"What does he say to you? In between hitting on you, I mean."

"He sort of hints that he's in the middle of something he doesn't like. That he got suckered into it and doesn't know how to get out. You know, it was the governor who got him that job, put on a full-court press."

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"So he could use him as a front man," I speculated. "The big-time local sports hero. Five years with the Niners and a Superbowl ring. And then he puts himself in these guys' pockets by blowing his money on bad investments. Let's see if he'll talk to me, Kim. I mean a real talk, not just a stupid interview. And if he wants, it can even be off the record."

"Does 'off the record' still count with you people?"

To tell the truth, looking at some of the reporters I worked with, I didn't know. But it counted with me.

Lumley agreed to meet with me, but not at his office, which was now located at the nearly completed arena. Not in some bar or restaurant, either, where I would've been expected to pick up the tab. The venue was a remote parking area in a national forest northeast of the city.

He pulled up in his red Porsche Carrera, the model with the spoiler that retracts at low speeds. It was a car a Chevy pilot like me could only dream about.

He was one of those athletes who age well. He had the craggy good looks of a Joe Namath and an easy smile and, as my wife had indicated, a reputation for chasing skirt. And what was better—or worse, depending on your viewpoint—of nailing it.

We leaned up against a wood-pole fence. We talked about everything but what we'd come to talk about. At one point he made motions of climbing back in the Porsche and driving off. The fact that he didn't told me how desperately he thought he needed help—*any* help—even *my* help.

He said: "I knew from the start they were only bringing me in as a front man. The guy who looks good and everybody likes, who can go out and do all the PR stuff, the TV stuff. And I also knew that Roy Kramer would be the actual manager. You know Roy?"

I didn't, but I sure made a note of his name.

"And I figured, a big pie like this, a couple of hundred million dollars and politicians involved, that there'd be some things happen. You know, buddies getting the inside track on certain contracts, relatives hired for jobs. But outright stealing—" he shook his handsome head—"that I never figured on. And listen to me, Sam, we're not just talking about beer money. It may be as much as two or three million dollars by now. And all of it split among maybe half a dozen people."

"Are you sure about this?"

"I'm not sure about anything. You think they'd tell me? It's just that they're so damned obvious about it, so damned sure they'll never get caught. And the worst part of it, they've worked it—Kramer's worked it—so that my signature and nobody else's is on everything. If anything goes wrong, I'm the one ends up holding the can. Not that they want that. They want it to go on forever. To

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keep on stealing even after the arena's up and operating. And there's nothing I can do about it. They've painted me into a corner and like a big dummy I helped them do it."

"There's one thing you can do about it, Jake."

"What's that?"

"Play hero and expose the mess."

He eyed me. "You'd like that, wouldn't you? It'd give you the story of your life."

"You bet it would. But it'd also put the *Sun* on your side, the biggest circulation paper in the state. And sooner or later you're going to *need* somebody on your side. And we already know a lot of it, Jake. We know about Lafferty, Carmichael, and Whey. We know about the governor."

"I figured you did. The governor, huh? Yeah, well, I guess I knew about that part, too."

"So here's what it comes down to. Either you end up being the good guy or you end up going down the tubes with the rest of them. And why should you? You haven't taken any money, have you?"

"No. Well, perks, maybe. A big discount on the Porsche. A fancy set of golf clubs."

"Well, some defense lawyer might make a big deal out of it, but otherwise that's nothing." Actually, I didn't know whether it was nothing, but like any other conscienceless newspaperman I was willing to say so.

"So which way are you going to jump?" I finished.

He stared off into the forest for what seemed fifteen minutes but was probably only that many seconds.

"I've been keeping a kind of diary," he said at last, "to protect myself. I've got some other stuff, too. Come to my office around eight tonight and I'll give it to you. We'll get your wife to work late. That way it'll look like you're just dropping by to pick her up. Then maybe tomorrow, the next day, we can meet out here again."

He climbed in the Porsche, but before he drove off he said this: "I hope you're not just suckering me, Sam."

And right there the bottom dropped out of my stomach. Because in a way I *was* suckering him. Setting him up for my own benefit without knowing the real consequences for him.

Real reporters do this all the time, I told myself as I started the Chevy. Which is why I ought to stick to reporting batting averages.

The new arena sat on a flattened piece of ground between downtown and our so-called river—most places it wouldn't even rate as a creek.

I managed to park on the wrong side of it and had to walk all the way around to get to the only currently usable entrance. Most of the work crew had already left for the day, and the few interior

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lights were well spaced. I took the stairs, the smell of new concrete in my nostrils and my footsteps echoing hollowly.

The Sports Authority offices were in a bank on the north side of the arena. You could tell you were approaching them by the new-carpet odor. I entered the first one I came to, which turned out to be a reception area. The offices were just starting to be occupied, and there was a stack of cardboard boxes against one wall.

I didn't know where to look for Kim, or for Jake Lumley, either, and I would've felt funny calling out their names. So I just began randomly opening doors and peering inside.

I thought I heard someone behind me and did a one-eighty to see who it was. There was nothing but an empty hallway and a lingering feeling of creepiness at the base of my scalp. Deserted offices can do that to you. There's something intrinsically spooky about them.

There were five offices, some with windows facing the river, some with windows looking down on the floor of the arena, and one with both. I figured that one for Lumley's and went inside.

No lights were on. The office was empty.

I thought: The bastard got cold feet.

I stood there anyway, alone in the dark. I stood there because I had the sense that I'd been hearing a noise in here, and when I'd opened the door, the noise had stopped. I also sensed somebody waiting breathlessly.

I said: "Kim?"

I don't know why. It just came out.

Dead silence. Then from my right a muffled voice.

"Sam—is that you?"

I jerked my head around. "Kim, where the hell are you?"

"I'm locked in. Get me out."

I fumbled around till I found a desk lamp and turned it on. To my right I saw a door with a snap lock. I unsnapped it. Beyond it was a room about the size of a walk-in closet with a bunch of boxes stacked inside. Kim was in there all right. She was on the floor with a sack drawn over her upper body and her arms roped to her sides.

I went to help her, and like that the door slammed behind me and the lock snapped back in place.

I whipped around and pounded on it.

"Sam—?"

The bar of light at the bottom of the door disappeared. Somebody had flicked off the desk lamp. Complete darkness. I felt along the wall and found a switch and a naked bulb came on in the ceiling.

I knelt beside Kim.

"Sam, what's happening?"

"Now we're both locked in."

I used a pocketknife to cut the rope, then pulled the sack off her. It was a cement sack, and she was well dusted with the stuff that

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had clung to the sides when it'd been emptied. It was a wonder she hadn't choked on it.

"I was just hanging around waiting for you when somebody pulled the sack down over me from behind. Then they bundled me in here, wherever 'here' is."

"Lumley's office, I think."

"And then—Sam, are you hurt? You've got blood all over you."

Not all over me. Just all over my sleeve. And the only place I could've got it from was the desk when I'd been fumbling around for the lamp.

I felt my guts sink.

"We've got to get out of here," I said.

I went to the door and began twisting the knob, throwing my weight against the paneling.

"Sam, the ceiling."

It wasn't a real ceiling. It was just acoustic tile concealing all the pipes and conduits that ran overhead.

I shoved a cardboard box against the door and climbed on top it and pushed some tiles aside. Then I reached across the wall and pushed some tiles away there, too.

I lowered my head again. "I think I can make it," I said.

But what with the pipes and all, it was too tight a squeeze for me.

"Let me try," Kim said.

Somehow she managed to slither through, though not without adding a few scrapes and bruises to her cement-dusted thighs and elbows. I heard her land on all fours on the other side. Then she gave a low, shuddering moan that sent ice up my spine.

"Kim—?"

She began frantically and not very effectively working the lock on the other side of the door. I kicked the box out of the way. The door came open and light fell on her. She had blood on her hands, blood on her legs, blood on her shoes. Her knees looked like they were about to cave, so I grabbed her and we waltzed into the office, stumbling over the thing she'd landed on—the thing that hadn't been in that spot when I'd entered the office. A pretty god-dam dead Jake Lumley.

Somehow we ended up in the hall. I guess neither of us wanted to stay in there with the body, particularly since we were both soaked in its blood.

I came to finally and began frisking my pockets.

"What're you looking for?"

"My cell phone. Crap—I must've left it in the car."

"This place has *dozens* of phones. Come on, we'll call the police."

You'll call the police, I thought. I'm calling my city editor.

But neither of us called anyone. That was because we hadn't gone two feet when three figures popped out of the reception area

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ahead of us. Two of them were construction guys with wrenches and hammers in their hands. The third one—I didn't know it then, I found out later—was Roy Kramer.

"That's them," Kramer yelled. "They must've broken out somehow."

We all froze, staring at each other, and there was plenty of fear on both sides.

Then I reached through the door of the adjoining office, grabbed the back of a wheeled chair, and sent it spinning down the hall at them.

Wrong move. We should've just stayed where we were and let them turn us over to the police. But how could we know then that those construction workers were just that? How could we know they wouldn't beat us to death as somebody had beaten Jake Lumley?

We turned and ran up the hall.

"Sam, this way—the fire exit!"

We pushed through a heavy door and began rushing down the bare concrete steps. It was like that scene in *The Lavender Hill Mob* where Alec Guinness and Stanley Holloway run all the way down the stairs of the Eiffel Tower—except that we didn't end up giggling when we got to the bottom. We ended up hyperventilating.

We threw open the fire door and stepped out into the night. Off to our left we could see the main entrance to the arena. There were a couple of cop cars there with flashing blue lights.

"Just in the nick," I breathed.

I started to head for them. Then Kim grabbed my arm and held me back.

"Sam, we're covered in blood."

"Huh?"

"They'll think *we* did it—just like those construction workers upstairs thought we did it."

We faded back into the darkness and started discussing it.

"We got no choice, Kim."

"We got this choice. We can go home and clean up and change our clothes. And while we're doing it, you can hardcopy all the stuff you got on your PC and we can take it with us to the police. Because you know why Lumley got killed, don't you? He got killed because he was going to talk to you."

"We can't go home. The cops got the only exit blocked off."

"They've got the only *car* exit blocked. We can still *walk*. I mean, what is it? Four miles if we use the Third Street Bridge? You used to jog that much every morning."

"Yeah, used to."

But now that she'd pointed out our condition, I didn't really want to walk up to those cops either. So we took our own bad advice and faded into the velvet night.

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That fading into the velvet night business. Kim and I had first started going together as students at the university, and there'd been a couple of campus film societies that showed old films. We'd both been tight for money at the time, and it was a cheap date. A lot of those movies were great, but even some of the best had some pretty hokey lines in them. So Kim and I began adapting them as private, inside jokes. "Fading into the velvet night" was one of them. Another came from an old British flick called *Room at the Top*. The ingenue loses her virginity in a boathouse, and as she walks away with her calculating boyfriend she squeals: "I don't feel any different! Do I look any different?" After that, whenever we were someplace where there were a lot of people—a shopping mall, a bar, you name it—one or the other of us would shout out those lines and break up laughing. Our friends all thought we were nuts.

As we trudged up to our modest ranch, I wondered what we should shout now. Probably: Look, we got blood all over us!

We stripped off our clothes and stepped jointly into the shower.

"When's the last time we did this?" I asked.

"Probably not since KimberlyAnn."

I got out before Kim and toweled off and threw on some clothes. Then I went into the alcove off the den to start hardcopying my files. There was just one trouble. My computer wasn't there anymore. The plugs for it had been ripped out of the wall with such ferocity that they'd left scorch marks behind.

It hit me about as hard as the sight of Jake's body had. It hadn't been a regular burglar who'd done it—I knew that much. Because a burglar would've grabbed the color TV, too.

Television.

I stepped back into the den and turned it on. And there on the screen was the arena and the cop cars with the flashing blue lights, except more of them now, and an ambulance to cart Jake Lumley away. And out front of it all, Ellen Goodrich of Action Five News with about three inches of makeup on her face and a microphone in her hand.

". . . about eight-fifteen when Juan Mesa of Enderby Construction saw Sam Kelly walk through those doors with something that looked like a baseball bat in his hand. What happened then between him and ex-State football star Jake Lumley we can only speculate. But there are rumors that Kimberly Kelly, Sam Kelly's wife, may have been sexually involved with Lumley."

A gasp from behind me. Kim had come into the room, wrapped in a towel.

"Sam, I never—"

"Shut up," I said.

Not because I didn't believe her, but because I wanted to hear the rest of it.

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". . . in a bizarre twist police believe that Kimberly Kelly may have participated in the killing and are anxious to take both her and her husband into custody . . ."

"Then why don't they just come here!" Kim snapped at the screen.

At which point, as if on cue, a flashing blue light appeared outside the window.

I jumped to my feet. "Grab some clothes! Don't bother to put them on—just get them!"

I snatched up my wallet. Kim came out of the laundry room with a random assortment of clean clothes in her arms and her towel hanging half off. I grabbed her and propelled her through the back door—an easy enough task since somebody'd ripped it off its hinges.

We crossed the darkness of the backyard, then ran along the backs of the adjacent houses. Kim kept spilling clothes, and I had to run back and snatch them up again so we wouldn't leave a trail. And meanwhile every dog in every house was snarling obscenities at us. It was just good luck that one of them wasn't outside to tear a piece out of us.

We crossed a road. We ran along behind a school. We entered a park where there were tennis courts but fortunately at that hour no tennis players. We traversed a series of unlit baseball diamonds, finally taking refuge in a dugout.

Kim began sorting through the clothes. There was just enough to cover her, though it was a funny assortment. Slacks. A brassiere but no panties. A threadbare jersey. And six tube socks, none of which had the same color stripe—whatever happened to plain white tube socks? There was also a spare set of boxer shorts for me, but no shirt, so I'd have to make do with the T-shirt I was wearing. As for footwear, I had on loafers and Kim still wore her shower clogs.

"Kim, that baseball bat they said I had—I went in there empty-handed."

"You idiot, you think I don't know that? You don't even own a baseball bat anymore."

"Yeah, but I could've picked one up somewhere. What I want to know is why that Mesa guy lied about it. Did somebody pay him off or something?"

"Power of suggestion, I bet. Roy Kramer probably said, 'Didn't you see that bat he had, Juan?' And Juan, wanting to be important, says, 'Yeah, I remember it now.'"

"Listen, they stole the computer with all my stuff on it."

"Ooh."

"That's why the back door was off its hinges."

"I didn't even notice, I was too busy trying to hold my towel up."

"But whoever it was screwed up, because I still got all my files

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at the paper. All I got to do is get hold of someone over there. I wonder if there's a phone anywhere in this park."

We found one near the exit road. I used it while Kim kept an eye out for the cops.

I wanted to get hold of the night editor, but instead I found myself talking to Alison Reed, the paper's golden girl. They'd probably brought her in to cover breaking events, and once she realized who she was talking to, she wouldn't transfer me to anyone else.

She began cooing about how I should come in and tell my side of the story—to her and nobody else, of course. After which she'd probably turn me over to the cops in a fanfare of flashbulbs. I cut through all that.

"Look, I got some stuff on disk that puts an entirely different light on this business. You need to dig them out of my desk—they're in a plain Manila envelope marked 'Arena'—and start making hardcopies. I'll call back in about an hour and tell Garrison where to send a car to pick up me and my wife." Garrison was the night editor. "And one other thing, tell him I want somebody from Dunbar and Sloane waiting for us." Dunbar and Sloane was the newspaper's law firm.

"But a police detective came and got all that stuff."

"A police detective? When?"

"It was before I got in. Nine, maybe. Nine-fifteen."

Too fast. And how would the police know about my files anyway? Or that they had any bearing on Lumley's death?

The answer was, they wouldn't.

Alison was going on about how angry Garrison was that the floor people had let the detective get away with my files. That stuff all belonged to the *Sun,* goddammit! I hung up on her and left the booth.

I told Kim about the detective. "We've got to get moving again. They've got call tracing at the paper. They'll send somebody over here and maybe the police will tag along."

"But Sam, where do we go?"

"Somewhere, nowhere. Let's just do it."

We trudged the backstreets of subdivisions. Whenever the headlights of a car passed, we put our heads down so our faces wouldn't be visible. Once we ran into a guy giving a late-night walk to his dog. We did a U-turn and cut up a side street. Finally we ended up on a bench under some trees.

We couldn't figure anything. Not where to run, not who to ask for help. But we did begin to form a picture of what must have happened at the arena.

There'd been some sort of showdown between Lumley and Roy Kramer. Maybe Lumley had had a few drinks—he was sort of known for it—and Kramer had come into his office and rubbed him

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the wrong way. So Lumley had told him just what he was going to do about the rake-off scheme. Then Roy had come back at him, letting him know what would happen to him if he crossed the governor. At that point maybe Lumley had grabbed a handful of his shirt. Kramer was a skinny guy, and he wouldn't have stood much of a chance against Lumley in a fight. So he'd panicked and hit him with something—not a bat—something solid he'd grabbed off the desk. And hit him again because he was scared. And then again till Lumley was the horrible mess we'd stumbled over in the dark.

"Jake must've dropped my name during the argument," I said. "Otherwise why would Kramer have pulled that sack over you and locked you in the storeroom?"

"Maybe just to buy time, Sam."

"If so, he sure used it well. Probably called Carmichael or Lafferty or somebody—"

"The mysterious Whey."

"Yeah, who then sent somebody around to grab my home computer and my files at the office. And all the while that's going on Kramer's waiting at the arena for me so he can set me up for the murder. And what a job he did. I can feel the noose tightening around my neck now."

"They use the electric chair in this state, Sam."

"Thanks for reminding me." Old decrepit Sparky that was more famous for causing fires and sending up purple smoke than for electrocuting people. And Affable Al, our law-and-order governor, had them lined up so deep on Death Row that they almost needed numbers like in a butcher's shop. Just take your place at the end of the line, Mr. Kelly.

I thought about Jake Lumley.

"You know, Kim, in the end he was a hero again—just like he was in the old days at State and with the Niners. He was going to stand right up and shine a light on the bad guys even if it meant getting his knees busted. And what was I? Just another rat reporter like the ones who take some stupid remark made by a coach or a player and turn it into a front-page knife job."

Car lights appeared at the bottom of the hill. We left the bench and began trudging through the darkness again. And half an hour later Kim spotted the open window.

The governor's reception was designed to spotlight all the new industry he'd brought to the state. It was sort of the unofficial kickoff for his next campaign. The trouble was that it was being held at the country club and we'd need wheels to get there. But Kim had an idea about that, too.

"Sam, we left both our cars at the arena, but in different places. What are the chances that the police impounded one of them, but

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missed the other? I mean, it isn't as if they were sitting out there by themselves. Some of the construction guys were working overtime, and there were other cars out there, too."

"Yeah, and the story Jake Lumley put out was that I was dropping by to pick you up. Which would lead people to believe that we only had one car between us."

"If they left my car," Kim said, "we're screwed. Because I didn't grab my keys when we ran out of the house. But you keep a spare key to yours in your wallet."

She didn't add: Because you're always locking yourself out of it, you dummy.

"How do we get the car out past the cops?"

"The back gate'll be open so construction company trucks can get through."

"Maybe it'll be open and maybe it'll be locked for the duration."

"Only one way to find out, and that's for me to walk over there."

"In broad daylight? And what's this *me* stuff?"

"You're the chief culprit, so you're the one they're really looking for. Besides, I can disguise myself."

She'd found a long-billed cap sitting on top of the commode tank in the bathroom—a building-supply company giveaway—perfect camouflage for passing herself off as one of the construction crew at the arena. And when we rooted through the desk, we came up with a pair of sunglasses.

I still didn't like it.

"It's a long walk in shower clogs."

"We need transportation, Sam, and this is the only way to get it. And besides, when I get to the greenway, maybe I can catch a bus."

We split the money in my wallet. Then I hid in a nearby stand of woods. The time passed grayly by. It got to be noon, and a sick fear set in. The police had grabbed Kim, and now I was alone. And what about KimberlyAnn? Would she have to rush down from the university and try to bail her mother out while I lived off berries in the woods? Then a horn tooted on the road.

I slid into the passenger seat of the Chevy and Kim took off.

"Is that warm grease I smell?"

"I took a chance and stopped at the takeout window of a fast-food joint."

We parked on a dirt road and scarfed cholesterol burgers. There was an abandoned house across the way with an old leaning barn behind it.

"This is where we'll bring Roy Kramer. If we can get our hands on him, and if he shows up at the reception."

"He's supposed to, Sam."

"Maybe he'll stay away out of respect for the dear departed. And

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how do we get past the state cops? There'll be a bunch of them out there, running interference for the governor."

"Don't you have a bag of golf clubs in the trunk?"

So that was how we worked it. We parked on a side road at dusk and slipped out of the woods behind the sixteenth green. I wore the building supply cap and played caddy while Kim led the way with a club in her hand. She had her hair tied back and wore the sunglasses and looked pretty authentic except for the shower clogs. At any moment I expected some old duffer to point at her feet and start screaming like one of those aliens in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers.*

Our plan—what there was of it—was to mix with the catering crew, and they played right into our hands. When we reached the back of the clubhouse, we spotted their truck at the service entrance. Large trays of goodies were being unloaded and carried inside. We stashed the clubs in amongst the ornamental shrubbery and joined in. The caterers thought we were from the country club, and the country-club people thought we were extra bodies brought in by the caterers.

There were a bunch of burgundy jackets hanging in a cloakroom off the kitchen. We grabbed a pair and, presto chango, we were waiters.

The festivities were already starting, and a red-faced guy in a white jacket ordered us to take some trays in. There were a bunch of reporters from the TV stations and the capital newspapers in there, gathered around the buffet table. That's what reporter means in the Ancient Greek: *Free eats!* There were other people I knew as well, and as I circulated with the tray, I had to do a little dance to keep my face from being seen. I thought I was doing pretty well at it. Then I heard a cold, Jack Nicholson-style voice directly behind me.

"I see you, you blankety-blank!"

I almost dumped my tray all over a Party chairwoman. Then, as people laughed at me, I spun around and saw a computer behind me. It was a Lightspeed 2000, and it was marketed by one of the state's new high-tech companies. Thanks to my drudgery on Input, I knew all about it. It had a chip that converted e-mail into voice output, and you could choose from a wide variety of voices, including, apparently, Jack Nicholson's. And now some clown at a computer in another room was sending out random messages, trying to get a rise out of whoever was nearby. It was the computer-age equivalent of a whoopee cushion.

I didn't like all the attention I was getting, so I got out of there and carried my tray back to the kitchen. On the way I ran into Kim headed in the other direction.

"He's here," she whispered.

Kramer. And sure he was here. What better place to hold a pri-

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vate meeting with the governor and bring him up to date on what was going on? No one would even notice.

I got rid of the tray and eased out of the flow of traffic, and a few minutes later Kim joined me. We retired to a remote part of the hall.

"Where did you see him?"

"He was headed up those stairs."

We climbed them ourselves. At the end of the second-floor hallway a state trooper was guarding the entrance to a room. He hadn't yet seen us so I grabbed a vase of flowers off a table and tried to pretend I was carrying it someplace.

Kim opened a door. I carried the vase inside. We were in the room next to the one the trooper was guarding.

"That trooper boxes things up for us," I said. "No way we can grab Kramer with him around."

"We'll just have to keep an eye on him and wait, Sam. Then maybe corner him in the parking lot when he leaves."

"If he's alone. If he's in a party, we're screwed."

There was a door connecting with the next room. We could hear the murmur of voices behind it.

"That's probably him in there," I said.

We stationed ourselves at the door and listened. Kramer was in there all right, but there were two others as well. The governor—that explained the presence of the trooper—and a mysterious third. Who was it? Whey? Carmichael? None of the above?

"Well, this is just a mess, Roy."

The governor. It sounded as if the meeting had just started.

"It was self-defense. He would've killed me!"

"He would've punched you out, maybe."

"And besides, he was going to spill everything to the *Sun*. To that guy Kelly."

"No need to worry about that anymore," the third guy said.

"You got everything then, did you?"

"I snatched the computer from his home and all the stuff he had at the paper. The computer's at the bottom of the reservoir, and I poured gasoline all over the disks and melted them down in a trash barrel. What a stink they made, too. And Kramer here got all the stuff that was in Lumley's desk."

"There's still Kelly himself," the governor mused.

"He's on the run, and what can he tell anybody anyway? He's got no backup information, and Bullard's people will think he's just trying to blow smoke."

Bullard was our hockey puck of a police chief.

"Just the same, it'd be better if he never was caught."

"Just disappeared, you mean."

"Best thing for everybody, in my opinion."

There was a silence. Then the governor spoke up again.

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"I'll have to say a few words about Jake tonight."

"A moment of silent prayer. That ought to do it."

They went on like that. We didn't know it, but they were just marking time until Kramer got in position by the door. They'd heard us somehow. Heard us unconsciously shift our weight as we listened. Or maybe one or the other of us had brushed up against the paneling. Whatever it was, they'd passed silent signals among themselves and now they were going to find out who we were.

Kramer yanked open the door. We tumbled into the room like a couple of baggy-pants comedians, and some guy we'd never seen before pointed a pistol at us.

Kim stared at him from the floor. "Which one are you? Whey or Lafferty?"

The guy looked puzzled. "I'm Bernouli," he said.

And now we were in Bernouli's box.

The governor towered over us, all six foot three of him plus half an inch of silvery hair. Old Affable Al Dooley himself.

"Who are these people?" he demanded.

"It's them," Kramer squealed. "It's Kelly and his wife."

"Well, isn't this a holy disaster."

"No, it isn't," Bernouli said. "You said you wanted to make them disappear. Well, we got them now. We can work it any way we want."

"You seem to forget I'm the governor. I thrive on plausible deniability. And here I am in a room with these people."

"We'll hold them here until after you're gone. Then we'll take them off somewhere."

"Well, get them off the floor, anyway. I'm tired of looking at them there."

There wasn't much furniture in the room. Just a couple of chairs and a desk with a computer on top of it. Bernouli sat me down at the desk and Kim in a chair alongside it.

"How'd you two get in here?" he snarled.

"We carried a vase."

"Get smart with me again and they'll have to feed you through a straw."

"Hell," the governor said, "they posed as waiters. Look at their jackets. The question is what do we do with them now."

The three of them retired to the other side of the room to discuss it. But Bernouli didn't take his eyes off us and he kept the pistol in his hand.

I stared at the computer in front of me. It was a Lightspeed 2000. I think I went a little dizzy when I realized that. The keyboard was on a little shelf underneath. I didn't bother to roll the shelf out. I just inserted a finger and pressed a key, and the computer screen, which had previously been dark, came to life.

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I was facing the computer screen. Bernouli was staring at me across the room, but he couldn't see what I saw or what I was doing. The computer was set up for continuous transmission e-mail, and the last words on the screen were:

I SEE YOU, YOU BLANKETY-BLANK.

Somebody'd been up here playing with the thing. Then the governor and Kramer and Bernouli had arrived and run him off. But they hadn't bothered with the computer. What was that to them? Nothing, but to Kim and me it might be the world.

I eased the keyboard out an inch at a time. Then I began typing. Kim saw what I was doing and, pretending nervousness, clicked her fingernails off the arms of her chair to cover the sound of the keys.

I typed what I remembered of the conversation we'd heard from the next room. And since I was a reporter and trained for that type of thing, I remembered just about everything.

GOVERNOR. WELL THIS IS JUST A MESS ROY.

And downstairs where all the people were, where *all* the reporters and TV guys and gals were, Jack Nicholson's voice should be repeating the very same words. Repeating them loud enough to startle people. The ones nearest the computer would begin reading the words on the screen as the electronically reproduced voice spoke them. Some of the TV reporters would gather around, the newspaper guys. What is this, they'd wonder. Is this a hoax?

They'd wonder that if everything was still hooked up, that is. If it wasn't, I was just shouting in the wind.

I typed: KRAMER. IT WAS SELF-DEFENSE. LUMLEY WOULD HAVE KILLED ME.

Kim stared straight ahead. She could have no idea what I was doing or whether it would do any good. I didn't have any idea whether it would do any good, either.

I typed: KRAMER. JAKE LUMLEY WOULD HAVE SPILLED EVERYTHING TO THE SUN. HE HAD TO BE TAKEN DOWN.

That wasn't exactly what Kramer had said, but I needed to make things clear to whoever was listening to this.

I reached the end of what I remembered. I typed: WE'RE IN THE ROOM ON THE SECOND FLOOR WITH THE STATE TROOPER OUTSIDE. COME NOW. COME QUICK.

Then I began listening to what they were saying on the other side of the room and typing that.

Bernouli was going on about an abandoned cabin he knew. It was on the shore of a lake in the mountains. "We'll take them there," he said. And do what? Burn it down with us inside? That certainly seemed the direction he was headed.

I typed: COME ON, SOMEBODY. THEY'RE GOING TO KILL US.

All at once there was a commotion out in the hall.

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Shouts. Some of them good-natured, as if the shouters thought they were participating in a joke.

The governor had been listening sourly to Bernouli. Now he jerked his head around.

"What the hell's *that?*"

More shouts, some of them from the trooper. The door rattled.

I touched Kim's arm. "Run for it!"

She bolted for the door. Bernouli brought the pistol up. And that was when I picked up the computer monitor and hurled it at him.

It never reached him. The connecting cable brought it up short. But in trying to get out of the way of it, Bernouli took an awkward step backward and ended up on his rump. That gave Kim enough time to make it to the door and for me to go running after.

We forced our way out into the corridor. There were a lot of people out there and one of them said: "Hey, that's Kelly and his wife."

Then Kim yelled: "Arrest us! Arrest us! We're fugitives!"

And eventually somebody complied.

The governor took off for the state capital in his helicopter. But some smart cop grabbed up Bernouli and Kramer. He must've been downstairs listening to Jack Nicholson.

Right away Kramer panicked and began squealing about cutting a deal. After all, he was the only one likely to be invited to take a seat in Old Sparky.

We all ended up—us, Bernouli, Roy Kramer—at Municipal Plaza where the Department of Public Safety was. The police took separate statements from Kim and me. As I was giving mine, I could hear Kramer in the next room, singing arias, cantatas, whole operas about the arena kickback scheme. Down the hall Bernouli had pretty much decided to do the same thing—but in a softer voice and with a lawyer present to see he got a good deal. I know what sort of deal I would've given him, and the infamous baseball bat wouldn't have been the half of it.

Eventually Kim and I found ourselves all alone on a bench in an unswept hallway. A *smelly* unswept hallway. It must have been three A.M. by then.

Kim eyed me wearily. "Sam, are we still officially under arrest?"

"I don't think we ever were. They never put handcuffs on us. They never read us our rights."

"Then why don't we just get out of here and go home?"

I cogitated on it. I studied all the ramifications and repercussions. It must've taken all of half a second.

Then we found an exit and faded into the velvet night. ●

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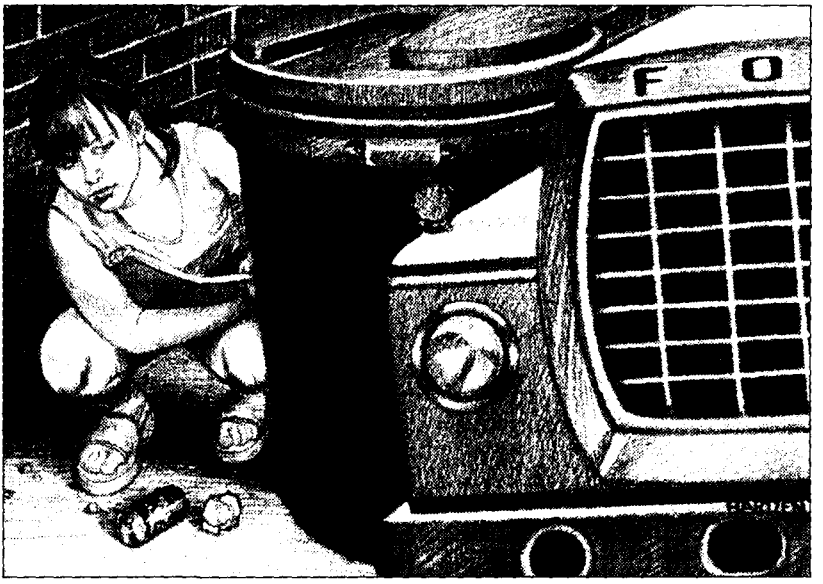

Art by Laurie Harden

BLIND ALLEY

by Mary Jane Maffini

It was one of Mummy's bad days.

The living room drapes were closed and the lights turned off. You couldn't see Mummy tucked in the wing chair. The smoke from her cigarette curled toward the ceiling, so probably she was leaning back with her eyes closed. I hoped she wasn't biting her lips.

I noticed her blue Belvedere package and her gold lighter matched the upholstery. The living room is French Provincial. I was training myself to observe details.

I didn't try to tiptoe in to give Mummy a kiss.

On bad days, the rules were simple. Stay out of sight and stay out of trouble. Today would be a good opportunity to work on my detecting skills.

Daddy had already left for the office. The Lincoln was gone from the garage and a Rothmans butt was lying on the garage floor. Another detail, but perhaps not very useful. I picked it up in case Mummy's day started to improve. She might decide to take the DeSoto to Antoine's Style Shoppe and get upset about the cigarette

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butt. That's why Dinah and I never mind picking up after Daddy.

Dinah was locked in her bedroom with pin curls in her hair. I could still smell the Breck shampoo in the bathroom. She was busy planning how to dance with Kenny Wedgewood at the hop on Saturday night. It was Thursday and time was running out.

Mummy never came into the kitchen on bad days, and Sadie was off, so I didn't have to worry about Cream of Wheat. I ate a lot of Frosted Flakes right out of the box, for energy. Then I drank a big glass of Orange Crush. Daddy would call that a chaser.

"I am currently fascinated by the dark undercurrents affecting children during the supposedly idyllic fifties," writes Canadian author Mary Jane Maffini. Her new story for *EQMM* explores the theme. Ms. Maffini, who is an Arthur Ellis Award winner for her short fiction and an Arthur Ellis Award nominee for her first novel, has recently completed a second book, and is at work on a third.

I never could get braids right without Sadie, so I put my hair in ponytails. I left off the ribbons. Detectives shouldn't have to wear bows.

Because it was the end of August, all my friends were busy getting ready for school. There was no one to investigate with. I would have to spend the day away from Havelock Street where our neighbors didn't understand that a detective has a job to do. What was the use of having those big maple trees if no one was ever allowed to climb in them while they were hunting for clues?

At least it wasn't raining. This was the sunniest day we'd had in weeks. It looked like a good day to go downtown. I'd have to walk, but it was just a mile. I planned to get myself a roadster when I was older. And a sidekick. Everyone always laughed at that. People didn't realise the importance of girl detectives.

Carleton Street was jammed. Mostly mothers taking kids to get new outfits for school. Afterwards, the lucky ones would get a milkshake.

Tommy Bork, the meanest boy in our whole school, went by with his mother and father. "I'm getting a leather binder," he said.

"Maybe you should ask for a brain instead," I said.

Dinah was always telling me I would have less trouble if I just kept my big mouth shut. I didn't believe Tommy was getting a leather binder. Mummy used to say the Borks were terribly common.

I hoped Mummy would have at least one good day before school

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started. Daddy wouldn't know how to buy school clothes, although maybe he'd be okay for colored pencils and Hilroy scribblers. But he could send his secretary, Miss Merkely. Miss Merkely looked just like a model. She'd think a leather binder was a good idea. I planned to show her the beautiful blue one with navy trim at McLeod's Bookstore. I could keep my detecting notes in that binder. My Big Chief notebook looked too kiddish. And another good thing, Miss Merkely always took me to The London Grill for a chocolate sundae. Miss Merkely would get a sundae, too, and say how much fun it was to talk girl talk.

Unless I got into trouble, which was so easy to do, most adults didn't notice me. They might say, "There's that Chalmers girl, no, not the pretty one, the chubby one, what's her name?" People thought I was too young to understand things, which I definitely was not. But as a girl detective, I didn't want them to pay attention.

I decided to play hopscotch. Hopscotch didn't require any equipment, just a piece of chalk. Sadie always said I needed to get more exercise and anyway it was an excellent way to look for clues without anyone noticing. That morning, the best watching was at the California Fruit and Confectionery Store at the corner of Edward Street. Everyone passed by there. Mr. Sabatino didn't mind if I played hopscotch under the awning.

I was on the lookout for people stealing chocolate bars. I had some suspects. I knew Mr. Sabatino would give me one of his big wide smiles when I showed him the evidence. He'd be surprised because he didn't know I was a detective. He was always nice to me and sometimes would give me an Aero bar. Maybe because I didn't swipe the mints from the glass jars the way Tommy Bork did. Or maybe because Daddy was his landlord. He would pat my head and squeeze my shoulders. I wasn't used to people touching me, but Mr. Sabatino was nice. Dinah says men should be tall, dark, and handsome, like Daddy. Mr. Sabatino looked like a big pillow with ears, and he made me want to smile. He was the only person I knew with a shiny head. And he smelled like peaches.

When it got hot, I decided to practice surveillance. The alley beside the California Fruit and Confectionery Store was the best lookout, especially in the space behind the garbage bins. It was dusty and stinky, but still an excellent detecting spot. From one side, I could see the entrance to the parking lot behind the building. Daddy always parked his Lincoln there next to Miss Merkely's Chevy BelAir convertible. Mr. Sabatino kept the California Fruit and Confectionery Store truck up by the entrance. I liked the truck because it had bananas painted on the side, where it said, *We're a Good Bunch.* From the lookout spot you could see everyone who passed by on Carleton Street. The parking lot is sur-

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rounded by buildings, so the alley is the only way in or out of it. That was handy for a detective.

People often snuck their cars into the parking lot. Tommy Bork's father's blue Ford was on the side, blocking the alley. I wrote the license number in my Big Chief notebook. Mr. Sabatino hurried back and forth three or four times taking boxes and bags to the truck for home deliveries later. Someday, I was going to ask if I could go with him. I thought I could gather lots of clues, because Mr. Sabatino's truck went everywhere and it had no doors on it. He didn't spot me behind the garbage cans. I wrote that in my notebook, too. *Surveillance skills improving.*

Not much was happening in the alley, so after awhile I got bored and went to see Mr. Sabatino. The California Fruit Store was a good place to practice details, because it was full of strange things, such as chocolate-covered ants. That week there were three gigantic bunches of bananas hanging from hooks in the ceiling. Mr. Sabatino said they came all the way from Brazil by boat. There were huge wooden barrels with yucky things floating in them. Mr. Sabatino said they were black olives from Greece and when I got older I would be crazy about them.

The store smelled of old fruit and there were always flies buzzing. The twirling ribbons of flypaper would have been pretty if they didn't have dead flies stuck on them. Mummy would never allow flypaper in our house.

Even though Mr. Sabatino offered me a banana and something he called a nectarine, I decided to move on. I'd never tasted a nectarine and anyway, it was time to do a report on the morning.

Daddy's office had gold letters on the door. *Chalmers Insurance* in big letters and *Trusted Advice for Three Generations* a bit smaller.

It was boiling out by afternoon, but Miss Merkely was wearing new fall clothes, a reversible tartan skirt and a yellow Banlon sweater with her cultured pearls. Her patent leather pumps had very high heels and she swayed when she walked. Dinah always said the word for blondes like Miss Merkely was glamorous. She always wore Chanel No. 5. She looked like Mummy in her wedding picture, only Mummy had dark hair and red lipstick.

Miss Merkely kept a bowl of humbugs between her telephone and her typewriter. She gave me as many as I wanted. Sometimes she let me use the typewriter. It was a Remington and it had been in my grandfather's office since 1911.

Today Miss Merkely's eyes were red. She was blowing her nose and hiccupping. Something sad must have happened because she kept talking about the baby. Maybe a sick cousin or something.

Daddy was always very nice to Miss Merkely. He would give her the afternoon off if she needed it. Daddy kept telling her not to

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worry because he could take care of things. I knew he would. Daddy takes care of things for all of us.

They didn't notice me because Miss Merkely was sobbing so much she shook. Or maybe my surveillance skills were much better. It was not a good day to stay at Daddy's office.

I went back to my hopscotch game, this time in the shade in the alley. I could get the rock where I wanted it. I hardly ever stepped on the lines. I was a good hopper. But I must have been concentrating too hard on clues because I slipped on the gravel and scraped my knee. I bit my lip hard because detectives shouldn't cry when they're on the job. Mr. Sabatino was carrying boxes to the truck when he spotted me. He took off his apron and used it to wipe my knee. "You should wash that cut in the bathroom and put a little iodine on it," he said.

I hated iodine because it stung more than any cut, so I just said okay. Tommy Bork went tearing along Carleton Street towards the store just at that minute and Mr. Sabatino rushed back to the door, waving his arms. He forgot his apron. I didn't want it to get dirty in the alley so I picked it up for him. I would get a huge smile for that. I got some water from the sink in the store bathroom and cleaned the rest of the gravel from my knee.

When I went back outside, I heard Tommy Bork yelling at Mr. Sabatino. He said things so rude that I could never even repeat them. I ducked behind the garbage bin in case Tommy caught me alone in the alley. Anything could happen then. It would be harder to convince anyone I was a detective if I had a skinned knee *and* a black eye.

Just when I thought it was safe to stick my head out, I saw Daddy rush by. I hadn't even seen him come in! It must have been when I was washing my knee. I would have asked him to help me get past Tommy Bork, but he looked like he had a lot on his mind. I could tell by the way he wore his hat. He might have been very angry that the Borks' car was blocking his way, or maybe something bad had happened at the office. He tossed his cigarette on the gravel near the bins as he crunched past and looked straight forward.

The insurance business had lots of ups and downs. Dinah and I were not supposed to ask about them because Daddy needed to relax with a gin and tonic and not be pestered with questions from small fry. In the evening he had Kiwanis and Rotary and the Lion's Club, so that wasn't the best time, either. I reached out and picked up his cigarette butt.

Tommy Bork's parents passed me on their way to the car. They had a ton of parcels for their spoiled brat. Tommy saw me step out from behind the garbage bins. Darn. Now I had lost my best hiding spot. "You just wait," he said, lowering his voice so his parents couldn't hear him. He stuck his tongue out.

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"You look better that way," I said. I was betting he wouldn't knock me down in front of his parents. They kept walking toward their Ford. Suddenly Mrs. Bork started screaming. She hurried past me out of the parking lot, scattering her parcels. A minute later, Mr. Bork raced behind her. He was the color of glue.

"Call an ambulance," Mr. Bork kept yelling. I ran back down the alley to the parking lot to see what the fuss was about.

Miss Merkely was lying on the ground. Her neck was twisted in a funny way and her string of cultured pearls was broken. There was a strange stain all down the concrete wall and a red puddle spreading behind her head. I dropped beside her. I didn't even feel my skinned knee.

She was out cold. I slid Mr. Sabatino's apron behind her head to keep her beautiful blond hair out of the gravel. "Don't worry, Miss Merkely, I'll look after your pearls," I said, holding up both broken parts of the necklace. I tried shaking her shoulders to wake her. Then a policeman took my arm and made me come away. He was very kind and told me to be a big girl.

The sound of sirens was getting really loud.

It must have been a robber, people on the street said, or a tramp. I didn't think we had robbers or tramps in our town.

The next time I saw Miss Merkely she was on a stretcher with her face covered. You could just see her patent leather shoes with the high heels. People lined up on the sidewalk to watch. The pushing and shoving started as some men carried Miss Merkely into an ambulance. More policemen were making people keep back. One of them said, "Move along, folks. Show's over."

I thought Mr. Sabatino might know what was happening. It was crazy inside the California Fruit and Confectionery Store. Ladies were crying, everyone was talking at once. Kids were stealing chocolate bars. A policeman was yelling at people to be calm. Mr. Sabatino was flopped on the chair behind the cash register with his head in his hands, crying loudly. Someone gave me a hard shove and I tripped and crashed into a smelly barrel of olives. I dropped most of Miss Merkely's pearls and they slid under the front counter, where I couldn't reach them. All I had left was the short piece with six pearls. I think that Tommy Bork was the one who pushed me.

Another policeman took our names and told us to go home. He smiled when I explained I was a detective. "What are you looking for? It has to do with Miss Merkely, doesn't it? I saw her."

His face got kind of cloudy. "Your parents might be worried about you. We'll let you know if we need your help."

"All right," I said, "I have everything written in my notebook."

Mummy had already gone to bed, although she wasn't asleep because I could hear Nat King Cole on her record player and I

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could smell a fresh cigarette. She didn't answer her door.

Even after such a terrible day, Daddy still had to go to his Rotary Club because he was the president. Dinah stayed on the phone all evening talking to Marilyn Myers about whether to wear bobby sox to the hop. Sadie was still off. No one would say anything to me about Miss Merkely. Some people on the street had told me she died. I needed to know if it was true.

My throat hurt.

I made myself two Swanson TV turkey dinners. It was dark when the policeman came to my house. He had a man in a suit with him. I was happy to be able to talk to them without any interruptions.

"We'd like to know what you saw today," the man in the suit said.

"Everything. I record details in my notebook."

I noticed them look at each other even though they pretended not to.

"Why do you write in this notebook?"

"I'm working on my detecting skills."

For some reason the man in the suit kept chewing his lip. That must have hurt. The policeman seemed to have a problem with a bad cough.

"Did you see anything suspicious?"

I took a minute to think. "What do you mean by suspicious?"

"I mean, was anyone in the alley who shouldn't have been there?"

"Oh, yes. Tommy Bork ran in and out after stealing mints from Mr. Sabatino. His father parked his car there and he's *not* supposed to. Mrs. Bork went in and out like she owned the place."

"And the man from the fruit store?"

"Of course, Mr. Sabatino has to load his truck. That's okay. He pays rent." I tried not to sound like I thought the policeman was asking stupid questions. "He was very upset about the Borks' car. I think he needed to move in a hurry and he couldn't get out because of them."

The policeman wrote that down. "How do you know he was upset?"

"He was yelling and he had big perspiration patches under his arms."

They nodded at each other. I hoped those Borks were going to get a ticket.

"Anyone else? Anything suspicious?"

I closed my eyes to think but I didn't remember anyone suspicious.

"No."

"And you are sure?"

"Of course, I wrote everything down." I showed him my Big Chief notebook. I wished it were a leather binder. I bet they wouldn't smile at that.

They flipped through the pages. Then they said they needed to

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take the notebook away.

"So you didn't see anyone else come out of the alley? Or go in?"

I'd already said I would have noticed anything suspicious. "No one. Who are you looking for?"

The man in the suit stood up and patted my head. I didn't like that. The policeman said, "Thank you, Detective. Your notes will help a lot."

"Is Miss Merkely going to be okay?" I asked.

On Friday the California Fruit and Confectionery Store was closed. The awning was still rolled up. The door was locked. I pressed my nose to the window. The lights were off inside. You could smell that some things were starting to go bad. Probably those nectarines. The big bunches of bananas still hung there. I thought I heard flies buzzing on the flypaper. Dinah would say that was my overactive imagination.

Someone had broken a window with a rock. I bet it was Tommy Bork.

Lots of people kept stopping outside the California Fruit Store and pointing and talking. Some of the people sounded angry. Some of the mothers pulled at their children and hurried away. As soon as one bunch left, another crowd pushed in. Tommy Bork said that Mr. Sabatino had been arrested. He said his ma always knew there was something greasy about that guy.

I didn't think it was fair. A lady in a brown hat told me they had a lot of evidence against Mr. Sabatino and that should be a lesson to all of us.

"A lesson about what?" I asked, but she didn't answer me.

I never even suspected Mr. Sabatino could hurt Miss Merkely. Kill her. I didn't see any evidence. That meant I was not such a good girl detective after all. After that, I didn't even want to try.

I got the blue leather binder *and* a reversible tartan skirt for school. Mummy got a silky black mink coat that went right to her ankles! Daddy stopped going to Rotary meetings. Instead he would take Mummy to the country club. I could hear Mummy laughing through the window as they climbed into the Lincoln. Daddy hired a new secretary, but she was not glamorous and she didn't have humbugs. Dinah spent all her time in her room giggling with Marilyn Myers. They kept the door closed, which wasn't fair.

I was not allowed to go to Miss Merkely's funeral. I didn't think that was fair, either. I wouldn't dare tell anyone, but I missed Mr. Sabatino a lot. I will never understand how he could have done such a terrible thing.

For a long time afterwards, I could smell Miss Merkely's Chanel No. 5 on the six pearls I had left. ●

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ONE BAD APPLE

by Phil Lovesey

"Here's a little teaser for you, Detective Constable," said the portly man eating crisps in the passenger seat. "Scene of the crime. Care to tell me where every crime in criminal history has been committed?"

Why don't you piss off, and stop littering my guv'nor's car with your half-eaten crap? D.C. Colin Taylor wanted to reply. But didn't. He flicked the windscreen wipers on instead, listening to the soft rhythmical pattern, watching the rubber blades smash and blur the rain outside. "No idea, sir," he eventually settled for.

The older man worked another fistful of crisps into his mouth, pausing to chew loudly. "I'm talking about every crime, Detective Constable. The scene of every crime, from a sick stateside serial killer to a little old lady in Chelmsford pinching a Fray-Bentos chicken-and-mushroom pie."

"Really, I've no idea, sir," Taylor replied, wishing the journey away. How much longer until they reached their mysterious destination? He'd never known the M11 as bad, four lanes of near total congestion, thirty-second bursts of twenty miles an hour, then back to standstill. For the last three-quarters of an hour.

He thought of his guv'nor, D.I. Melling, sunning himself, no doubt, somewhere idyllic on the Algarve. Lucky, lucky bastard. Still, the guv'nor deserved it. Can't have been easy forking out for and organising the wedding. Taylor remembered how drained he'd looked at the reception, father of the bride, leaning against the marquee bar, tie askew, nursing a pint he'd held for the previous forty minutes. Shattered. Still, it was a blinding do.

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Phil Lovesey is the author of several earlier stories for *EQMM*, including the 1995 story "Double Event," which was a finalist in the Mystery Writers of America's 50th Anniversary Short Story Contest. Mr. Lovesey is currently working on a new novel called *The Screaming Trees*, to be published by HarperCollins later this year. He is the son of one of *EQMM*'s longtime favorite writers, Peter Lovesey.

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And then to come back on Monday to D.I. Adams. Two weeks of the fat, self-opinionated lump until the guv'nor returned. Major downer.

Adams shifted slightly in the seat, reaching down under the sensitive police equipment in front of the dash, pulling out a Mars Bar. His third since leaving New Street. "Come on, young Taylor, think, man! Scene of every crime, ever."

Taylor felt forced to hazard some kind of guess, if only to shut the bloke up. "Planet Earth?" he replied, silently determining to book the same holiday time as the guv'nor next year.

Detective Inspector Adams stubbed a short, plump forefinger into the side of his fleshy temple. "The human mind, Taylor," he said, milking it. "Every crime always starts in the darkest recesses of a three-pound lump of knobbly mush upstairs." He punctuated the revelation with a large lump of knobbly Mars Bar.

"Very interesting, sir," Taylor wearily replied, tired of the journey, the endless stream of DeBono type mind-games, and the ever increasing stench of cheese and onion. He looked over, found the source. Adams, helping himself to another bag, a confectioner's graveyard of old wrappers at his feet. No wonder the others on the squad had taken the piss when he'd learnt the identity of his temporary partner.

He'd smiled back, bemused at first, new to CID, unaware of the routine when other squad members went on holiday. On most occasions, he was told, the squad made do. But then sometimes, "this fat bloke from Romford gets sent over. Adams, his name is. Adams Apple, we call him—on account of the fact that his is forever bobbing up and down as he stuffs his fat face. Old-timer, mid fifties, never made it above D.I. And that's after serving nearly thirty. Good collar record, though. Fingered a fair few nutjobs over the years. But don't worry, son. Chances are, we'll all just muck in together until D.I. Melling gets back."

Twenty minutes later, Taylor had stood in D.C.I. Shrimp's spartan office, the normally spacious room made chaotic and smaller by the round, smiling man wedged into a creaking wooden chair.

"Taylor," Shrimp said simply, "this is D.I. David Adams. He's with you for the next fourteen. Answer his questions, do as he says. He leads, you follow. Got it?"

Taylor nodded, walked to the seated man, took the proffered podgy hand.

"Thanks," Adams replied. "They call me Apple. Just answer me this, will you?"

"What, sir?"

"That corner shop up the road still open?"

An hour later, they were stuck in driving rain and idling traffic on

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the M11. Taylor wondered what Adams's agenda was—beyond stuffing his fat face. The paperwork back at New Street nick was no nearer to getting done, and from what he'd gathered over the police radio, most of the rest of the squad were now occupied with a possible armed suspect holding a woman hostage on a car-park roof. Bloody typical, the young D.C. thought. A big one goes down, and he's playing chauffeur to Billy Bunter's dad.

Adams sucked at his fingers, savouring the last of the damp orange Cheesy Wotsit powder. "Care to tell me about Liz London?" he asked jovially.

A brief nauseating image of a girl's body stuck with a hunting knife crashed into Taylor's mind. Liz London. "Fast" Liz London. But utterly still, stopped by death and the blade lying by her side. The raw D.C.'s first murder case, him and the guv'nor turning it round, bringing charges, wrapping it up. "Junkie, speedball," Taylor replied. "Topped by her boyfriend . . ."

"Jamie Harrington?"

"Right." But why the sudden interest? Taylor wondered. The case was closed, Harrington sent down for life three weeks before the guv'nor's daughter's wedding. Old news, Fast Liz London. "Routine domestic," he went on. "She was the speed-freak, he mainlined any shit he could get his hands on. Tripping off his face, he was when me and the guv'nor arrived."

"He made the nine-nine-nine?"

Taylor nodded, tried to ignore the strangely uncomfortable tone in Adams's voice. No cryptic puzzles now, no lateral brainteasers, just simple questions. He felt almost as if he was being interrogated.

"And then," Adams continued, "you and D.I. Melling answered the call, went round to the address?"

"S'right."

An uncomfortable silence. Just the radio crackling. The woman on the car-park roof had been saved, gunman talked down. Taylor saw the others in his mind's eye, driving back to the nick, motors bursting with grinning CID men chuffed that the business had ended before opening time. Armed siege—worth a long lunch, that one, my lad, Melling would've said, propelling Taylor towards the bar.

Back to the past—Fast Liz London. "Point is, Colin," Adams managed over a poorly suppressed belch, "Harrington's brief looks set to appeal against the sentence."

"Standard for life, though, isn't it?" Taylor replied.

"Absolutely, Colin. Normally just a legal formality. Chance for the wig-wearers to bung another few thousand in the overseas account. However, in this case . . ."

"What?"

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"Your mainlining, knife-wielding, tripping, murdering junkie could have grounds."

A horn from behind. Taylor came to, saw the thirty-yard gap in front of him, slowly pulled away. Grounds, he thought, what bloody grounds?

There was a squeaking somewhere close.

Adams opened a bright red bag of Skittles. "You can turn the wipers off, Colin. It's stopped raining. Take the next exit, we're off to the rugby club."

Quarter of an hour later they pulled up outside Royston Royals Rugby clubhouse, a two-storey affair with changing rooms and showers downstairs, bar and small function room above.

Adams hauled himself from the car, stretched his heavy frame, and turned to a sky fighting against low dark clouds to reveal scant patches of weak blue above.

Taylor was struck with how much smaller the place looked in daylight. Granted, he'd been three sheets to the wind when he'd last stumbled out of there, head spinning, reeking of stale cigarettes, whisky, and beer, but somehow the place had just seemed bigger.

"Recognise it, do you?" Adams asked as they made their way to the entrance.

"Guv'nor's new son-in-law plays for the Royals," Taylor replied cautiously. "Had his stag do in here a couple of weeks back."

"A predictably well-behaved, dignified, and solemn affair, no doubt," Adams said, waiting for Taylor to open the heavy swing doors.

"Not really, sir. No."

"You surprise me."

Inside they were met by a thickset balding man in his early fifties, dressed in a Royals track suit, chewing gum, and staring suspiciously back.

Adams flashed the ID. "Mr. Bennett?"

"Same."

"Thanks for coming down."

"No choice, did I? Old Bill rings up and I can't do nothing else."

When, Taylor wondered? When did Adams ring the man? This morning, before they left? Couldn't have. Which only left a call from D.C.I. Shrimp's office, before Taylor had been summoned to meet his new partner—the one who he'd been ordered to follow, "answer the questions, do as he says."

They followed Bennett upstairs into the shabby bar area, again smaller than he remembered it being that night, home to sixty leering, jeering men, three strippers, and a crap comic called Dudley. Plus the guv'nor, and him.

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They sat at a small table, Adams fishing through his vast jacket for a photo he placed before the gum-chewing rugby man. "Recognise the girl?"

Taylor could, even from upside down.

Bennett nodded, looked up at the pair of them.

"Well?" Adams pressed.

"S'Fast Liz, poor kid," he replied. "Or was. Done in, wasn't she?"

Adams nodded. "Played a lot of rugby, did she?"

Bennett smiled. "She tended to play the field, really."

"Groupie of the uprights? Follow a lot of the home games, did she?"

Bennett squinted, eyes fixed on the younger man, trying to place him. "We have a few gentleman's evenings," he said slowly.

"Stag do's," Adams obliged.

"Liz used to come down, do a little number. The boys loved it." He clicked his fingers, pointed at Taylor. "You was down here a couple of weeks back, weren't you? Paul Canyon's piss-u—party."

Taylor nodded, flushed.

"Bugger me. The Old Bill crashing a stag do. I mean, I knew he was marrying a copper's daughter, but I didn't think he'd invite half the force down for his final night of freedom." The eyes looked suddenly panicked. "But, I mean, this is a private club. All the girls get paid. Nothing illegal's . . ."

Adams held up a fleshy, silencing hand. "This isn't about a few after-show 'extras' in the changing rooms, Mr. Bennett. It's concerning the murder of Liz London."

Bennett looked slightly relieved, set back to renewed chewing, nodding his head like a compliant dog. "Sure. How can I help?"

"So," said Adams as he and Taylor drew away from the clubhouse. "What do we have, Colin?"

"I really don't know, sir," Taylor replied, feeling edgy. "I really don't know what any of this is about."

"Well, let's start from scratch, shall we?"

Taylor said nothing, waiting.

"For starters, we now know Liz London used to do a turn at the Royals. Shouldn't really surprise us. She was attractive, had an expensive habit, and a fast reputation."

"How did you know?" Taylor asked suddenly. "How did you know she used to go there?"

"Fast Liz didn't always confine her nocturnal employment to the Royston area, Detective. I may look like a barrage balloon, but a few years ago, I held up the Romford Rascals scrum on Saturday afternoons. I saw her routine half a dozen times in various seedy clubhouses across the county."

Taylor didn't know which was harder to accept, the image of

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Adams on a rugby field, or the pathetically slain girl doubling as a stripper.

"When Tony . . . D.C.I. Shrimp called me over to your manor and told me of the impending appeal, I took a look through the case file, recognised the deceased's photo." Adams suddenly tapped the passenger window. "Pull over, Colin," he ordered, pointing to a newsagents'. "Time to replenish supplies."

Three minutes and two pounds seventy-five pence later, Adams hauled himself carefully back down into the car. "He pleaded guilty, didn't he, Jamie Harrington?" he said without ceremony.

Taylor nodded, wondered what was coming next.

"Didn't strike you as odd at all?"

A shake of the head.

"Your first murder inquiry, right?"

"Yeah."

"Explains it," Adams replied, opening an economy pack of custard creams and offering one across. "Want one?"

"No thanks."

"Don't worry about the mess, Colin. You know as well as I do, squad motors are cleaned inside and out whenever you need it. Simply fill out the paperwork, put in the request, and—bingo—this time tomorrow, you'll never know I was sat in this old jalopy."

"Right, sir."

"And it's 'Apple,' Colin, please."

"Right, Apple."

Fifteen minutes later they were back on the M11, southbound, forty minutes from New Street nick.

"Know why a lot of junkies will plead guilty to murdering their own grannies if needs be, Colin?" Adams asked eventually.

Another stupid bloody question. He'd had enough. The tight-lipped reply betrayed his annoyance. "No. Apple."

"Treatment," Adams replied. "Contrary to what you might think, life inside has its compensation for druggies. It's warm, dry, and if you act out enough, you'll qualify for daily methadone, virtually as good as the real thing. All at the taxpayer's expense." He attacked another custard cream. "Course, it's a very different outlook if you plead innocent and are then found guilty. Judges frown on it. Entrance into rehab programmes becomes harder, your name drops straight to the bottom of the pile."

"So what are you saying?" Taylor asked.

"Guess."

"That Jamie Harrington pleaded guilty when he wasn't?"

"Wasn't that difficult, was it?"

Taylor finally broke. "Bollocks, is what it is. He was messed up,

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out of his head. He stabbed the girl, hallucinated she was some sort of monster. I know, Apple. I was there when the guv'nor and I interviewed the smackhead back at the nick. His prints on the knife, the lot." He took his eyes off the road, shot them to the passenger side. "Look, what the hell is it with this Liz London thing, anyway?"

Adams didn't react, absorbed in rebuilding a shattered biscuit. "D.C.I. Shrimp just wants to make sure everything's on the level. We're looking into things, that's all."

"But there's nothing to see!" Taylor insisted.

"And the autopsy report?"

The D.C. cast his mind back. "She was pregnant."

"But not by him."

Taylor almost lost his grip on the wheel. The son of a bitch was smiling at him, enjoying the wind-up! "You what?"

Adams licked his fingers. "Jamie Harrington wasn't the father of the unfortunate foetus, Colin. He said he was. He said a lot of things to get on rehab while on remand. But now he's straightened out a bit, he's having second thoughts."

"This is a joke, right?"

A can of Coke popped suddenly, spilling on the upholstery. "Sorry about that, Colin. Works will dry-clean it. No, it's not a joke. Harrington didn't get her pregnant, because, as he's now revealed to his brief, he's a jaffa."

"A what?"

"Seedless—he had the snip five years ago."

"A vasectomy?"

Adams smiled, nodded.

Taylor thought for a moment. "So he wasn't the father. So what? The girl was a slut. Anyone could've . . ." He stopped, mind ticking over.

"Yes, Colin?" Adams teased.

Taylor wouldn't be drawn, regardless of the vague scenario which was beginning to surface.

Adams yawned. "Just a notion, you understand, Colin. But maybe your guv'nor's new son-in-law could've banged her up, eh?"

"Him and any number of other guys," Taylor replied. "Could've been you. You said you used to go and see her shows."

Adams chuckled. "Years ago, Colin. And believe me, the only way I'd have fallen victim to Liz London's charms was if she'd dressed herself in a five-foot wrapper saying Mars Bar."

They turned off the motorway, began heading past Stanstead Airport towards Great Dunmow.

"Be amazing if it *was* him, though, wouldn't it?" Adams continued a little later. "And Liz, far from being the slut you imagine, would've been over the bloody moon."

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"I don't see how," Taylor truthfully replied.

"Girls like that, they're canny. Born survivors. Street tough. Suppose the lad had got her up the stick. Don't think for one minute Liz wouldn't have been smart enough to sniff the opportunity."

"Which was what?"

"Come on, man. A well-to-do lad like that, common knowledge that he was engaged to a copper's daughter, exposed as a two-timing rat who got a stripper pregnant?"

"Blackmail?"

"One possibility, isn't it?" Adams replied, reaching into a pocket and retrieving an earlier-opened pack of M&M's. "Maybe she told him. Confronted the lad. Told him her price for silence. Chances are he was sweating buckets. One piece of loose talk from her and the wedding's off."

Taylor tried to concentrate on the road. "Nah, not him. No way. Saw him at the stag do, the wedding. Cool as a cucumber, happiest man on earth. Not a care in the world."

Adams said, "True. But that was two months after the girl died. Four days after Harrington had been sent down for murdering her."

Taylor saw the lay-by ahead, pulled in sharply, switched off the engine, turned to the chocolate-scoffing man. "Apple, please. Can we drop the speculation?"

"Not with the appeal coming up, no."

"So all this is because some murdering junkie's straightened out inside and now wants to finger some other innocent sod for the crime?"

"No. It's more than that."

"Tell me."

"Fast Liz London used to be one of the best grasses I had."

A long silence.

Adams sighed. "When I heard she'd been topped, well, let's just say I took more than a little interest in the case. I'd lost a valuable asset. When Liz worked my manor, she helped me bang up any number of villains."

Taylor sat, watching passing traffic, head spinning.

"I knew Liz, and I knew her idiot boyfriend, too. Not by association, just what she told me. He needed her, her brains, her suss. She was the smart one of the pair, sorting the money, organising the scams, scoring the dope." Adams turned to the young D.C. "Believe me, Colin, Jamie Harrington would never have killed his woman. She was his supply. Last thing in the world he wanted was to be left to fend for himself."

Taylor shook his head, desperately trying to recall events, memories already blurring, fading in the claustrophobic confines of the

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car. "He was off his face that night. Path lab put the time of death sometime earlier that afternoon. He reckoned he must have had some bad gear. Stabbed her. Came to wandering around Chelmsford market a few hours later. Wandered back home, saw what he'd done. Called us. End of story. It's nothing to do with the guv'nor's son-in-law!"

But Adams wasn't listening. "I contacted D.C.I. Shrimp, asked him if I could have a root around. Didn't want any more egg on the force's face. He sanctioned it. Then I discovered the payments."

Taylor needed a good neck massage, feeling rock-stiff with the tension, revelations. Okay, so he was a relative newcomer to CID, but what the bloody hell was going on? Adams, from another division, snooping around the case? And at D.C.I. Shrimp's blessing?

"It happens sometimes, believe me," Adams said, reading the confusion.

"What payments?" Taylor barely managed.

"Five hundred a month for three months before she died. All cash, paid in every third Wednesday into Liz London's building-society account. She'd never been richer in her miserable life than on the day she died."

Taylor struggled to get back to what he knew. "So, she was a good-time girl, probably on the game, maybe had a regular client, rich bloke, easy pickings . . ."

"Colin," Adams said slowly, "D.C.I. Shrimp gave me a backstage pass. Access All Areas. I talked to the anticorruption boys. They pushed some buttons on their computers. In those same three months, your guv'nor's account showed a regular withdrawal of five hundred, cash, every third Wednesday of the month."

They stopped off in Great Dunmow, found a cafe, left the car parked outside.

Adams tucked into a weary slice of strawberry gateau while Taylor watched over a coffee, trying to ignore the one mental image which wouldn't go away—his guv'nor's face at the wedding, exhausted, yet relieved, so very relieved.

"The day before the murder," Adams pressed. "What shift were you working?"

"C," Taylor replied. "Two till ten."

"Anything stand out in the memory?"

He thought back. "Fairly routine. Bit of a punch-up outside one of the clubs. We attended."

"Not Uniform?"

"One of them was a bail absconder. We got the call to run him back in. Bastard puked in the back of the car."

Adams pulled a face. "Happens, Colin. So you filled in a docket, got Works to clean it up, right?"

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"Guv'nor said he'd do it. Said he needed the wheels the following morning, had to organise a photographer for the wedding."

"Why not use his own car?"

"In for an M.O.T."

Adams smiled to himself. "That old chestnut. So he takes a sick-stinking car back to his place for the night, then drives it round to a wedding photographer's the next day? Come on, Colin."

Taylor tried to swallow the growing anger with another sip of coffee. What was the fat bastard saying now, that his guv'nor had lied to him, done the girl in? What? "I think this is getting out of hand," he said quietly.

"Want to know what I think?" Adams quickly replied, leaning in close.

"Not really."

"I think your guv'nor was paying Fast Liz off."

"Crap!"

"I think she sussed him good and proper. Got herself up the duff with the son-in-law, then sought out the proud father of the bride-to-be and made a little hush-money arrangement. . . ."

"He's not like that!"

"He's her dad, for Christ's sake!" Adams replied. "And she's the apple of his eye. The wedding—her big day. What kind of father's going to take the risk of a junkie-stripper turning up and ruining the damn lot? Think of the money, the shame. He had to do something. Knew Liz London wouldn't let up . . ."

"You're off your head. . . ."

"So when you get a puker in the back of the car the night before, he sees his chance. . . ."

"Jamie Harrington killed her!"

"No. He *found* her. She'd been dead for hours, remember? Dumped back in the flat is my guess."

The whole scenario was as ludicrous as it was comic. Any other situation and Taylor would have dismissed it utterly. But having Adams so close, so insistent, pinned him down. He fought to calm himself, not get sucked in. It was as if the big man could somehow eat him, ingest him in the same casual manner as he had the chocolate and crisps. Taylor felt hunted, cornered, shocked vermin about to be consumed by a fat cat. "I want to speak to my guv'nor about this," he croaked, cursing his naivete, inexperience, feeling a traitor the moment he opened his mouth.

"You're not the only one, Colin," Adams replied.

They were back in the car, heading back towards New Street once more.

"Answer me this," Adams suddenly announced. "When did D.I. Melling have Works clean this car?"

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Taylor was beginning to sweat. "I . . . can't remember."

Adams reached into a pocket, pulled out a folded docket, brushing off crisp-crumbs as he laid it on the vinyl dash. "On the afternoon she died, it says here. Just before you started the shift. Had the whole motor cleaned down."

"Because it stank of puke!" Taylor insisted.

"Chances are there was something else in your car, too. Forensic traces, Colin . . ."

"This is crap!"

". . . I reckon he murdered Liz London right here, on the backseat of this car."

Taylor laughed out loud, looking around, mouth agape. "It's insane!"

Adams's voice was cold and sombre. "He met with her, told her to get in the car, maybe promised her a final payment to keep quiet. She gets in. He stabs her. Drives her round to the flat. Lets himself in with her keys. Dumps the body inside. Drives back to Chelmsford, has Works clean everything up. It still stinks of sick, so no one's going to pay too much attention to a few spare hairs, urine, saliva."

"Bollocks!" Taylor shot back. "Christ's sake! If he stabbed her in here, there'd have been blood everywhere!"

"Only if he took the knife out, Colin," Adams grimly replied. "And he didn't do that. Jamie Harrington did."

"This is so much—"

"Harrington came back wrecked. Saw the body, the knife sticking out of the love of his life, so he goes over, pulls it out, the blood begins to seep out, his prints are on the handle."

"No way."

"Then he calls the police. You and D.I. Melling attend. He's brought in, off his face. A little pressure from the pair of you and he confesses, knows he doesn't stand a dog's chance fighting it. So he takes the only option. Prison, chance to straighten out, start again, maybe."

"He murdered her," Taylor replied, nauseous in the cramped car, trying to concentrate, feeling the metal, plastic, and glass close in on, trap him. As he'd been trapped, conned by this grinning slug of a man.

Maybe they had gone in hard on Harrington. So what? The man was a useless, murdering druggie—bang to rights. The guv'nor doing it? It was laughable . . . yet . . . this Adams, this Apple, this one bad apple would see to it that the whole damned inquiry would be reopened. What then?

Taylor's thoughts swirled and collided wildly.

His throat dried.

Again, the image of his guv'nor—so very relieved.

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And all the time Adams waffling on . . . and on . . .

Scene of the crime, he'd said. It all starts in the mind, every crime . . .

Taylor looked down to the left, saw the fat slob hadn't even put his seatbelt on. . . .

There'd be an inquiry. Careers would be ruined . . .

Something exploded in his head.

He suddenly accelerated, closed both eyes, and spun the wheel sharply to the left . . .

Gradually it came into focus. Pockets of distant colour, blending to form clouds, lines, images. Then the pain. He screamed. Sounds. Voices. Something sharp in his arm. Then white. A face.

The guv'nor.

Taylor managed a brief smile.

D.I. Melling stared back at the broken body in the hospital bed. "Typical," he said. "I leave you for a fortnight and you spend the time lying around in hospital."

Taylor stared at the tanned face. "Am I all right?"

Doctors and nurses worked all around, pushing, prodding, poking.

"Few breaks here and there," one answered. "You were damned lucky. But you'll be in here for another month at least."

"And the other bloke," Taylor asked groggily. "Adams?"

"No seatbelt," came the quick reply. "DOA, I'm afraid."

Taylor fought to find Melling's face, waiting until the others had gone before speaking. "What happened?"

Melling sat, looked awkward, flushed, couldn't meet Taylor's enquiring eyes. "Car's a write-off. Steering column snapped, possibly. Thing was a bloody deathtrap."

"Not the car. Liz London."

Melling froze, took a moment to compose a reply. "She died. We nailed the murderer."

"He's planning to appeal."

"They always do."

"Adams thought . . ." Taylor closed his eyes, memories of the last journey coming back, ". . . he had a chance, Guv."

"Not anymore," Melling murmured. Then stood. "You're lucky to be alive, Colin."

"I know. Like you said, that car was a bloody deathtrap, wasn't it?"

For a long time, Melling hesitated at the end of the bed. Then turned and walked quickly away. ●

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Art by Mark Evans

RIDE A RED DRAGON

by Mark Coggins

Nobody ever looked less like the owner of a gambling joint than Scooter Hawkins. He was 180 pounds of flesh on a five foot, four inch frame, with bulbous green eyes, Charlie Chaplin moustache, and a matted brown toupee on a moon-shaped bald head. He was also a very right guy in my book.

Scooter's joint could be found about three quarters of the way down the road to Half Moon Bay from San Francisco. The best way to locate it precisely was to look for a dilapidated wooden barn with no class or structural integrity—and about half the autos in the San Francisco Bay Area parked in front. People came to Scooter's not because it was a swell place to look at but because he served quality hooch and gave his gaming tables a fair play.

I cut the lights and motor to the '24 Lincoln coupe I used for transportation and stepped out into Scooter's dirt parking lot. Scooter had called my office in the city that afternoon about "a serious thing that needed talking over." I hoped it was a job, because not making money was getting to be a full-time occupation with me. I waded through an acre or so of the gleaming Packards,

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Cords, Dusenbergs, and Caddies that came with the gambling house's rich clientele and stopped at the front door. Sound and light leaked through the bleached planks of the old barn and gave the night a lusty, chaotic feel. Jack Hartford, Scooter's Negro doorman, caught sight of me as I walked up, and smiled a big sappy grin. "Good evening, Mr. Lane. What brings a fine, upstanding citizen like yourself to Mr. Hawkins' corrupt establishment?"

"'Lo, Jack," I said. "Just slumming, I guess." The reason that I rated the big razzoo was because I had once led a police raid on Scooter's place when I was still working for the sheriff's office in Redwood City. Scooter and his boys never forgot it. "Is your fat boss in tonight?"

"Oh yes, Mr. Lane, he's in. Scooter never misses the weekend nights. Besides," Jack lowered his voice, "he's waiting for you to show. If we don't do something about those guys real quick, there's gonna be merry hell and everyone knows it."

"What guys are those, Jack?"

"I better let Scooter tell it, Mr. Lane. I just hope you'll do what you can to help us out."

Puzzled, I made what I thought were reassuring remarks and then stepped through the door as Jack held it open.

The entrance to Scooter's place stood on a platform ten feet or so above the floor. A wooden stairway on either side led down to the gaming tables. Scanning the crush of people below, I spotted Scooter in an ill-fitting dinner jacket standing by the orchestra. He was hamming it up with a conductor's baton for laughs. Not that the orchestra needed any help getting laughs: They had all the musical sophistication of a Salvation Army quartet.

I shuffled down the staircase and crossed the floor on a cheap red carpet that was as thin and grimy as a gas-station greenback. Scooter saw me coming about halfway there and cut out the conducting show. "Vic!" he shouted across the room. "How's a boy?"

As I moved up to him he grabbed my hand and began pumping like he was expecting high-grade crude. My voice vibrated as I said: "Doing just fine, Scooter. What's the latest?"

Mark Coggins's first novel, *The Immortal Game*, was nominated for Shamus, Barry, and Independent Publisher mystery book awards, and was selected for three Best of 2000 lists, including those compiled by the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the *Detroit Free Press*, and *January Magazine*. Mr. Coggins, who lives in San Francisco with his wife Linda, is currently at work on his second novel, *Vulture Capital*. ✝

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"The latest," Scooter said, dropping my hand abruptly, "is lousy. That's what it is. Come back to the office and I'll give you the crop of it."

Scooter led, in a roundabout way, to a door at the rear of the building. Getting there, we passed his customers—spiffy blondes in zebra stripes with hats like upside-down shoes, exiled royalty from a half-dozen foreign countries, J.P. Morgan look-alikes, loud redheads with portholes for mouths, sharp-faced grifters with lots of smarts and no job, and every other mug in the area with money he didn't want and nothing better to do. All of them knew Scooter by name, and many gave him the howdy-do as we went by.

At the door, Scooter turned the knob sharply and pushed through to the office. Nobody's decorating service had made any money off what was inside. A desk, a file cabinet, and three chairs that were just things to sit on completed the inventory. Scooter plunked down behind the desk and filled two glasses from the office bottle before he would say anything. Then:

"The boys and I need your help, Vic. In plain English, somebody is trying to boost the joint out from under me. Their idea is, I should sell out for the price of a cut-rate shoeshine, or pony up fifty percent of the profits every month for protection. Damned if I'll take either of those options."

"I wouldn't rate you as the kind of guy that would, Scooter, but who is the fellow with the bright ideas?"

Scooter took a fat swallow of scotch before answering. "There's the rub. We don't know who the guy is. If we did, it would be easy enough to sic some of our friends in county government on him and his goons, but we don't. All we get are these mystery letters that look like a chicken wrote 'em. That, and the rough stuff."

"What kind of rough stuff?"

"Two of our liquor trucks have been highjacked and burned, and Bennie, my best croupier, was given a good reason to visit the hospital for a week and a half. His jaw is still wired shut."

"Did you get any makes on the strong-arms who are doing it?"

"Naw, they always wore masks; it could be my relatives for all I know. But I'll tell you one thing: We can't go on like this much longer. With the losses from the liquor highjacks and the extra I'm spending on security, I'm losing money faster than you can flush water down a toilet."

Scooter pulled out a cigar the size of a rolled *Saturday Evening Post* and began filling the office with a smell like burning flypaper. I drank some of the scotch, which was good. "Then what you want from me," I said, "is the name of the gee that's steering all the trouble your way."

"That's right, Vic. And I'm willing to pay whatever you ask for the job."

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I smiled. "Let's hold off on the dough until I get my feet dried out from walking on water. This could be a little harder than you think."

"Oh, I know it's gonna be hard," said Scooter, shaking his head. "Whoever is doing this to us has gone to a lot of trouble to keep himself hidden—the rat. If you need any extra muscle, just tell me and I'll get some of the boys to lend a hand. Chuck O'Toole—my new bouncer—is good, and you might even get some use out of Jack Hartford."

I thanked Scooter and was just about to ask him why he'd waited so long to get help when a girl straight out of somebody's dream walked into the office.

"Vic," said Scooter, "you know my wife Angela, don't you?"

A dark brown woman with full, sensuous lips, black hair, and a lithe figure that was enough to make Mr. Webster rethink his definition of sex appeal. Oh yes, I knew her. But there was nothing original in that. Every other male in the Bay Area who didn't make a habit of wearing horse blinders knew her, too. Scooter had brought her home from New York to be his wife one day, and she had kept the job for the past three years. That surprised a lot of the citizenry because the popular idea was that Mrs. Hawkins was in it for a quick divorce settlement. But Scooter loved Angela, and if Angela didn't love Scooter she did a good job of playacting.

I told Mrs. Hawkins how nice it was to see her again, and she settled herself and the long silver gown she was wearing into the last chair in the office.

Three layers of gruff dropped from Scooter's demeanor as she sat down. He said, "That's a great-looking dress you have on tonight, sugar. You should wear it more often."

The dark woman laughed softly. It was a rich, pleasant-sounding laugh. "I only just bought the gown today, Andrew. But if you like it I shall certainly wear it often. Do you like the gown as well, Mr. Lane?"

Hearing Scooter called "Andrew" made me slow with my reply, but I managed to say something about what a swell dress it was. An awkward silence followed.

"Would you like a drink, sugar?" Scooter said at last.

"Yes, I would like a big drink," said Mrs. Hawkins cheerfully. "But what I would like even more is to know what you men are up to. You are both acting so very cagey." She smiled at me.

"Aw, Angela, we're not acting cagey. I wouldn't even know where to start with acting cagey. Vic just stopped by to talk about some business we have together. That's all."

"But business can mean so many things. Please get the drink you promised me and I shall question Mr. Lane to see if he is any more cooperative while you are out of the room."

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"Isn't the hooch in the office good enough, sugar?"

"You know that I don't like scotch. I think gin with tonic would suit me well right now. Yes, a gin and tonic, please."

"Nertz," said Scooter, rising. "There's no way you can win with women."

Scooter left the room, and Mrs. Hawkins turned to me. "I know that my husband is in some trouble, and I know that you are a private detective, Mr. Lane. Presumably, he has hired you to help him. Won't you please tell me what it is all about?"

She reached over to place a warm, slender hand on my knee. Then she applied a gentle pressure. There are probably men in the world that can take that kind of punishment without cracking, but my guess is they're all busy guarding harems in India.

Focusing on the wall behind her, I confessed, "Someone is trying to extort money or the ownership of the gambling house from your husband."

"And this is why Bennie Ramirez was beat up?"

"That's part of it."

"What other parts are there, Mr. Lane?"

I started to explain about the letters Scooter had been receiving when I noticed the sounds from the gaming tables outside were dying down. Suddenly, a woman screamed and a noise like a naval bombardment cut loose.

"Machine guns," I yelled. "Get down."

Angela Hawkins and I dove for the floor like we were going to swim on it, and periodic waves of high-caliber slugs began tearing through the wall above us. Showers of dust, splinters, and paint chips rained down as the slugs pierced the wall. I jacked out the revolver I was carrying and edged towards the office door. Reaching it from the side, I nudged it open far enough to get a good view of the barn floor.

I did not like what I saw.

Two men with masks stood at the top of the double stairway fumigating the room with lead from a pair of Thompson choppers. As the machine guns twitched and roared, the terrified crush of people on the floor stampeded for cover behind the gaming tables. Only one man stood in the open to face the guns. A pudgy, comic little guy with a cigar clamped in his teeth and a toy .32 automatic gripped in his stubby fist: Scooter Hawkins. Squinting down the barrel of the automatic, Scooter squeezed off a shot in the direction of the gunmen. It missed by two yards.

Without pausing, the gunmen leveled the choppers on Scooter and spasms of fire erupted from the oily-looking muzzles. The first slug caught Scooter square in the chest and drove him back into the craps table. His arms whipped out and the automatic flew from his hand and scattered a pile of chips. The next twenty

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rounds followed quickly, tattooing Scooter to the table and jerking his torso up and down like he was running a jackhammer. His toupee came loose and flopped to the ground in front of him.

The revolver in my hand could have been a Baptist hymnal for all the good it did Scooter. Finally I braced it against the doorframe and fired at the nearest gunman. My first shot went wide, but the second bit into his shoulder and spun him half around. The Thompson slipped from his hands and dropped to the floor below, clattering as it hit. I worked the trigger again and two shots thudded into the planking above the barn door. Figuring it was time to cut their losses, the second gunman raked the barn with a long burst and then ducked outside, steering his hunched partner before him.

Scooter was a goner and I knew it. His body lay slumped in a bloody pile next to the craps table. The decent thing to do was to close the office door and stop Angela Hawkins from seeing the body. But I couldn't let it go. I pried myself up and sprinted over to the discarded Thompson. Cradling it in my left arm, I charged up the staircase two steps at a time. When I reached the platform at the top, I kicked open the door and ran into the night.

Outside I found Jack Hartford crouching on one knee near the spoked wheel of a black limo. Hartford held his head in both hands and groaned softly: He had been sapped by the gunmen on their way into the barn. I peered into the darkness for signs of the getaway car. Red taillights at the edge of the parking lot danced up and down as a dark coupe bounded onto the main road and began chewing up highway.

I ran over to Hartford and jerked him to his feet. With his face level to mine, a knot the size of a robin's egg was visible over his left eye. "You got the keys to something with a lot of horses?" I yelled.

He stared at me with dumb eyes for a moment. "Oh," he said, "it's you, Mr. Lane. That Dusenberg over there—I parked it just before the chopper squad showed up."

"And?"

"And the keys are right here." Ornate keys jangled as he pulled them from his coat pocket.

I snatched the keys from his hand and led him over to the gleaming white Dusenberg. He stumbled as we approached, so I helped him into a nosedive that landed him headfirst in the passenger seat of the open roadster. Jogging to the driver's side, I levered myself behind the wheel, jammed the key home, and punched the starter button.

The big motor coughed to life and began idling in a low, throaty purr that I could feel in the pit of my stomach. I popped the car into gear and lit out across the parking lot, angling for the road.

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The Dusenberg was doing forty by the time we hit the edge of the tarmac. The Tommy gun on my lap bounced a foot when the front wheels connected, and Jack Hartford's head punished the teakwood dash.

I worked the roadster through two more gears, and soon we were hurtling through the night at more than ninety miles an hour. Far in the distance two gleaming points of red light winked at me. The gunmen had a good lead, but there was no way they were going to outrun the monster beneath us.

Jack Hartford twisted and squirmed beside me, and eventually managed to sit upright in the passenger seat. He cupped his hand next to my ear and yelled through the rushing wind, "What happened inside, Mr. Lane?"

"Those guys with the machine guns," I yelled back. "They cut Scooter in half. We're going to send them down."

Hartford said nothing for a full half-minute and then he made a sound like an accordion being drop-kicked. I risked a glance in his direction and found him sobbing uncontrollably. With his broad face buried in the crook of his arm, he wailed, "It's my fault. I let them get past me."

If anyone got around to assigning blame for Scooter's death, I was due for a bigger share than the gentle black man beside me. "Shut up, Jack," I shouted roughly. "We can cry over Scooter when the gunsels in front of us are venting their guts on the road." To punctuate my little speech, I tromped harder on the gas pedal.

The car shot forward like a rifle bolt and the steering wheel began to shake under my hands. The speedometer edged over a hundred. We skidded through a wide turn in the road and suddenly we were upon them. Bright light from our headlights reflected off their chrome bumper. Harsher streaks of orange light followed the reflection, and the windshield of the Dusenberg vaporized in front of us. The men in the coupe hadn't forgotten how to work the chopper.

I yanked my foot off the accelerator and dropped back two hundred yards. A gunman leaning out of the right side of the coupe continued to fire short bursts in our direction, but none of them were hitting home. I picked up the captured artillery in my lap and balanced the muzzle in a jagged V of broken glass at the base of the windshield. "Grab hold of the steering wheel," I shouted to Hartford. "We're going to make a run at them."

Hartford gawked at me like I'd asked to marry his daughter. Reluctantly, he leaned over and took hold of the wheel. I grasped the Thompson in both hands and aimed it down the hood of the Dusenberg. It was an awkward way to arrange things—like shooting through the propeller in a Sopwith Camel—but I didn't trust

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Hartford to work the machine gun and there was no way we could trade places.

I coaxed the gas pedal down and we began to close on the coupe once more. As we approached, the man firing at us arched farther out of the window to cut down the angle. A volley of slugs pounded our front grille. Our left headlight shattered and then went dark. I slid the chopper over an inch and took a bead on the torso of the gunman. Pulled the trigger.

The butt of the Thompson jolted into my collarbone and a piercing ringing detonated in my ear. Traces of orange light flew over the auto in front of us. I lowered my aim and the stream of bullets found its target. The gunman flopped like a fish on a stringer and then slumped against the side of the car. Sparks flew up from the roadway as the chopper fell from his hands to the asphalt. It seemed Thompsons were a hard thing to keep hold of that night.

Inside the car, someone grabbed the dead man's legs and levered him all the way out of the window. His body bounced on the roadway and slammed into our bumper. The Dusenberg shook to its springs and Jack Hartford collided with the passenger door, wrenching the steering wheel over as he hit. I stood on the brakes and the car went into a long, twisting skid that ended when we broadsided a scrub oak on the side of the road. I half fell out of the driver's side and clubbed myself silly with the butt of the Thompson. Hartford rebounded in my direction and perched on my shoulder like a 200-pound myna bird.

I must have blacked out for a minute because the next thing I remember was Jack Hartford slapping my head from side to side, asking if I was dead. The motion made me nauseous and I responded by airing my belly out over the side of the car door. I stared down at the ground. "Not unless they serve minestrone in hell," I said finally.

The car door was blocked by a branch of the oak so I slithered over the top and stood on wobbly legs at the rear wheel. The Dusenberg was a wreck. The left side was folded in like a squashed piñata and I was pretty sure the front axle had snapped. Steam hissed out of holes in the radiator. Jack Hartford looked at me with a beaten expression from the front seat of the roadster. "At least we got one of them, Mr. Lane. At least we chilled one of the bastards."

"Yeah," I said. "Ain't that a pip: We chilled one of the bastards. I'm sure Angela Hawkins will hardly notice Scooter being gone since we chilled one of the bastards."

"Aw, Mr. Lane, don't be that way."

I turned away from Jack Hartford and started back up the road to look for the body of the gunman we had hit. I found him lying in the middle of the highway, spread-eagle on the center stripe. I took

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hold of his ankles and drug him towards the yellow cone of light that spread from the Duesenberg's one remaining headlamp. The gunman was a short, sallow bird with thinning brown hair. Half the skin on his face had been ground off by the roadway surface, and it appeared that the ribs on the right side of his body were collapsed. Blood seeped from three gaping holes in his stomach.

Savagely, I tore through his clothing looking for a wallet or some other clue to his identity. Five minutes of searching bought me nothing but a loathsome vision of a scavenger pawing dead meat. I found no wallet, no scribbled telephone numbers, no laundry marks, and no steamship tickets to Buenos Aires. The man was as anonymous as a discarded newspaper.

In desperation I tore the shoes off his feet and banged them against the bumper of the car. A stiff piece of cardboard that was meant to patch a hole in the leather sole of one shoe fluttered to the ground. Holding the square of cardboard to the light, I found it was the flattened cover of a matchbox. One side of the matchbox had an elaborate representation of a dragon printed in red ink. The other side was scuffed from contact with the ground, but two columns of gold Chinese characters were barely visible.

"What do you make of it, Mr. Lane?" asked Hartford as he peered over my shoulder.

I shoved the matchbox into my breast pocket. "It says you will soon be taking a long moonlight stroll. Let's get going."

The photograph I bribed the morgue attendant to take of the dead gunman wasn't bad enough. The lighting in the autopsy room wasn't muddy enough, the dull, half-open eyes of the gunman didn't look empty enough, and the abraded skin on his cheek and forehead didn't show through the Pan-Cake makeup clearly enough. So to make matters worse, I dropped the photo facedown on the grimy floor of the Red Dragon teahouse and fan-tan parlor.

I reached down to pick up the photograph, and a red spike-heeled pump made its presence known by mashing my outstretched fingers none too gently against the 5 x 7 glossy. Attached to the pump was a long and slender leg sheathed in a dark silk stocking. More pressure was applied to my fingers and the leg flexed forward until the handsome knee that went with it butted square against my forehead. I heard a rustling of silk then, and a red curtain came down over my head: I was pinned to the floor of a Chinatown gambling house with my head up a woman's dress.

"You like what you see?" said a lilting voice above me.

"The view is swell," I groaned. "It's the boot-heel manicure I could do without."

Abruptly my hand was released and I snatched the photograph

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from the floor and struggled to my feet with as much dignity as I could muster.

"Wan Jung not wearing boots, silly fellow," intoned the woman in front of me.

She was tall and busty—especially for a Chinese—with jet black hair cut in a short bob that just began to curl when it reached her chin. Her face was done up like a porcelain doll's: a pale white foundation with a beauty mark painted high on her left cheek, shockingly red lipstick, and a lot of dark goo applied around the eyes, all topped off by a set of long false eyelashes that she batted slowly the way a resting butterfly pulses its wings. The dress she wore was a tight, slinky number with a high collar and the image of a dragon done in golden sequins down the front. The revealing slits up the sides seemed longer than the Great Wall.

"Boots or no, Beautiful Countenance, your tread is not soft like the caress of the rose petal."

Mentioning the English translation of her name earned me a big smile. "Wan Jung can be very soft," she said, and reached around to stroke the back of my neck. "You buy me a drink and maybe you see."

Her touch sent a shiver down my spine. I took hold of her arm and pushed it back. "Soft is nice, Wan Jung, but tonight I want cold, hard facts. I came to see the boss man. Go tell the son of an emperor who runs this place that Vic Lane is here and he wants to talk turkey."

Wan Jung laughed derisively. "You no make friends very well, Mistah Vic Lane. Sit there. Maybe Pu Ren come to talk, maybe not. But whichever, he no like rude man."

I eased into a rickety wooden booth along the wall and watched as Wan Jung walked the length of the smoky room to a curtained doorway. As she pulled the curtain aside, I caught a glimpse of a dimly lit office with a massive oak desk and a small, neat Chinese man sitting primly behind. The curtain swung back, and I was left to file my nails and ponder the frenzied game of fan-tan being played at a table beside me.

I was down to cuticles and one fan-tan player was two C-notes lighter before I decided that Wan Jung's man Pu Ren was a little too bashful for my taste. I got up from the table and walked to the doorway. No sound came from the office and there wasn't enough space between the curtain and the doorway to see inside. I grabbed hold of the fabric and pushed it back. Then I knew I'd been had.

There was a low grunting noise and a meaty paw clamped onto my wrist like a pipe-fitter's wrench. My arm was yanked through the doorway, and I had to go with it. Inside, I came face-to-face with my dance partner—a hulking Chinese with a broad, flat face,

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immense shoulders, and a powerful chest. He was dressed in black and his breath smelled from three feet away. I made a fist with my free hand and swung for his head. He blocked that easily and stepped forward to grab my throat with both paws and slam me into a corner of the office.

My head whipped back against the plaster and the pressure on my throat made my vision go spotty. I reached up to pry the Chinese's fingers loose, but bending steel girders would have been easier. Frantically, I kicked at his shins. I groped forward to mash his face. I pounded his forearms—nothing made a difference. The spots in front of me bled into an opaque curtain and I heard my breath gurgling like water in a cooling radiator.

I was all but unconscious when a calm voice at my side said something low in Chinese. The grip on my throat lessened and I felt a hand rifling my pockets. "So, Mr. Lane," said the same voice in a cultured British accent. "You wish to talk turkey. How well can you gobble now?"

I couldn't even grunt.

"There appears to be very little of interest here. Your wallet, complete with private-investigator's license, a .38-caliber revolver, a frightfully bad photograph, and . . . oh, yes, I see. You have a matchbox from our establishment. Don't tell me: This is the single clue to the strange and baffling disappearance of Mr. Whozis' pet hamster. The papers have been full of the case. No doubt the photograph is of the hamster. No, of course not—I do the hamster injustice. It must be of the redoubtable Mr. Whozis himself."

A cool hand slapped my cheek. "Wake-up call, Mr. Lane. You may pass out on the floor at some other time, but now be so good as to tell me exactly what you are doing here."

I shook my head clear and pried open my eyes. Planted in front of me was the mammoth Chinese with his hands still clasped around my throat. Off to one side, holding the take from my pockets, stood my inquisitor: the tall and busty Wan Jung.

"You," I managed to croak.

Wan Jung snorted. "Yes, it's me. You thought to speak with the frightened rabbit behind the desk? His name does happen to be Pu Ren, but he is paid for his skill with the abacus, not for dealing with riffraff like you. Now, I shan't ask this question again. What is your business here?"

The big Chinese let me pry loose his hands and I turned to face Wan Jung. "The photograph is of a man who was involved in a raid on Scooter Hawkins's gambling house down in Half Moon Bay. He and another loogan crashed the joint on Saturday night and let go with a few hundred rounds from Thompson submachine guns. Scooter Hawkins was killed, but the man in the photograph got his own dose of lead poisoning when the pair made their get-

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away. I found the Red Dragon matchbox on his body, so I came here to see if anyone knew him."

"What a delicate turn of phrase, Mr. Lane. You came here to see if 'anyone knew him.' Did you think that a white man would frequent a fan-tan parlor deep in the heart of Chinatown? I seriously doubt it. A more plausible explanation is that you believe we hired the two gunmen to terrorize Mr. Hawkins. Isn't that so?"

"Golly, did you get all that from your fortune cookie at dinner?"

Wan Jung leveled a chilling stare at me. The contrast between her present demeanor and the campy act earlier could not have been more pronounced. "You are a fool," she said finally. "As it happens, I did hear of the raid on the Half Moon Bay gambling house. There is little in the San Francisco area that escapes me. However, the idea that I would sponsor such an assault on Mr. Hawkins's club is preposterous. What possible gain would I achieve by haranguing the owner of a club for rich whites located fifty miles outside of Chinatown?"

"Scooter's club is right near the ocean. Maybe you hoped to use it as a landing point for sneaking in coolies from China."

Wan Jung spat something in Chinese to the giant beside me. "You are incredible!" she shouted in English. "I have wasted enough time. I will let Li Wenda demonstrate the error in your thinking."

The Chinese giant had already grabbed my wrist and twisted it behind my back by the time Wan Jung's English reached my ears. In the next movement, he shoved my head down to waist level and drove me straight into the wall.

The impact knocked me senseless. I remember biting into my tongue as my jaw snapped closed, and then slumping to the floor. I might possibly have managed a whimper as Li Wenda delivered the first kick to my ribs.

"You look poorer than the night you ran the Dusenberg into the tree, Mr. Lane," said Jack Hartford as he held open the door of the Half Moon Bay gambling house.

"*You* were steering the Dusenberg, Jack," I said, and hobbled across the doorway. "But I managed to run into something much worse on my own: a Chinese dragon."

Jack shook his head like he thought I'd been let out of the hospital too soon. That put him in good company, because the doctor who'd cared for me the last two weeks at San Francisco County General agreed. The doctor's opinion was that a concussion, two broken ribs, a punctured lung, and a lacerated tongue were good for at least a month. The savage throbbing I felt in my ribs as I negotiated the stairs of the gambling house convinced me there was merit in his argument, but I wasn't about to stay out of circu-

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lation any longer. I had called Angela Hawkins from my hospital bed that morning to set up a meeting for four o'clock this afternoon.

"Do you want me to help you down the steps, Mr. Lane?" Jack called from behind me.

"No, but walk with me to the office and tell me what's been going on around here."

Jack caught up with me on the third stair. "There ain't been much going on at all since the shooting. We had the funeral a week ago Tuesday, but tonight's the first night Mrs. Hawkins decided to let the place open."

"Have there been any more threats or beatings?"

"None that I know of. 'Course Mrs. Hawkins and Mr. O'Toole don't make a habit of consulting me on every little thing."

"O'Toole? Who's this O'Toole character?"

"He's the new bouncer Scooter hired before he died. You're fixin' to meet him right now." Jack gestured at the closed door to Scooter's office. "They're both waiting for you in there. I best be getting back to my place now, Mr. Lane."

I thanked Jack and knocked lightly at the door. "Come ahead," said a male voice.

I opened the door and stepped inside. It was difficult to say which had changed more since the night of the shooting, the woman sitting behind the desk or the office itself. Gone was the simple, cheap furniture Scooter had made do with; gone were the stark walls with the splintered bullet holes and the plaster and paint chips that had rained down from them. In their place were dark mahogany furniture, tasteful wallpaper, and a general air of a lot of money being made. The office was a better fit for the Standard Oil building in San Francisco than a converted barn in Half Moon Bay.

Angela Hawkins had undergone a similar transformation. Her flowing black hair was bobbed short, her silver evening gown replaced by a severe brown suit, and, with the exception of an austere film of pale lipstick, her face scrubbed clean of makeup. She had not lost her beauty—that was more than hairstyle and clothes—but she was no longer a warm, glowing emerald. She was a cold, precise diamond.

The man standing behind her was a brawny Irishman with red hair, pale skin, and plenty of freckles. His nose was thin, his eyes green, and he had a small, pouty mouth. He wore a loud red tie knotted loosely around an unbuttoned collar, and a pair of matching red suspenders. His shirtsleeves were rolled halfway up meaty biceps in tight rings of fabric. "Have a chair," he said abruptly.

I ignored him and gazed down at Angela Hawkins. "I want to tell you how sorry I am about your husband, Mrs. Hawkins. It's

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my fault the chopper squad got to Scooter that night, but I promise you I will not rest until I find and deal with all of the men involved."

Angela Hawkins smiled a thin smile. "Please do sit down, Mr. Lane. You mustn't think that you were the least bit responsible for my Andrew's death. He was playing a very foolish and dangerous game. Now that I fully understand the circumstances surrounding the shooting, it seems to me almost preordained."

I eased into a chair in front of the desk. "Nothing is preordained, Mrs. Hawkins. Unless you believe in palm readers or tarot cards. Anyway, you could hardly expect Scooter to roll over and play dead with someone trying to steal the club from him."

Angela Hawkins gave me a blank stare and turned to address O'Toole. "Make Mr. Lane and me a drink, will you, Chuck?" Then to me: "Is scotch all right for you, Mr. Lane? It's quite good. A single malt, in fact."

I said scotch would be spiffy.

She waited for O'Toole to set the drinks in front of us before continuing. "I'm sorry to have to tell you this—especially in light of what happened in Chinatown—but no one was trying to steal the gambling house from Andrew. It was all something he made up."

"Made up? Burned liquor trucks and broken jaws don't result from something you make up. Neither do twelve hundred rounds from Thompson submachine guns."

"Those things were frighteningly real, I'm afraid. The reasons that Andrew gave for them were not. Andrew was the one attempting to encroach on someone else's business, Mr. Lane. He was trying to take over the bootlegging operation of the man who supplies our liquor. All the threats and the acts of violence were reprisals for things that Andrew himself had done."

I took a large swallow of scotch and felt it burn at the stitches in my tongue. "That doesn't wash. Why would Scooter feed me a cock-and-bull story about an extortion attempt when he was trying to put the squeeze on a bootlegger? For that matter, why would he hire me in the first place?"

O'Toole cut in: "We needed to find out who was pulling all the strong-arm stuff for Campy—the bird with the whiskey. Scooter didn't figure you'd take the job if you knew the real reason, so he passed on the story he'd been telling Angela and all the other civilians on the staff."

"You're saying you were in on it, too?"

O'Toole hooked a thumb under a suspender. "That's right," he said levelly. "Scooter put me on the payroll to help with the play."

I narrowed my eyes and stared up at O'Toole. He met my gaze with an equally steely look. "You're making a big mistake if you accept this man's version of events on his say-so alone," I said to

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Angela Hawkins. "I don't believe Scooter would make a play like that, and we don't know O'Toole from Adam. My guess is he's working for the people that murdered Scooter."

O'Toole snorted. "That's right, Lane," he said. "I'm in cahoots with the horde of evil Chinamen you smoked from their lair at the Red Dragon. If all your gumshoe work is that good, Angela can be sure you've got it right this time."

Suppressing a smile, Angela Hawkins stirred her drink with an index finger, then brought the finger to her mouth to lick off the scotch. "I don't mean to belittle your advice, Mr. Lane, but I don't have any doubts that what Chuck is saying is true. You see, I've spoken with this Campy fellow, and we have come to an agreement. If we leave him alone, he'll leave us alone."

I started to respond, but she cut me off: "I know what you're going to say. You're going to say that I can't let Andrew's death go unpunished—that I must get my revenge. Well, that is a man's way of thinking, not a woman's. I grieve for Andrew, but for me this miserable affair is over—and I want it to stay that way."

"Meaning you don't want me to continue the investigation."

"Meaning exactly that." She pulled an envelope from the top drawer of the desk and set it in front of me. "That is a check for two hundred dollars. Please take the money for your trouble, and let Andrew rest in peace. We'll all be better off that way, believe me."

I stared down at the envelope for a long moment and then picked it up and slid it into my coat pocket. "To Scooter's memory, then," I said, raising my glass in a toast.

Angela Hawkins clicked her glass against mine and drank the amber liquid it contained. I watched her carefully and then set my glass down without drinking. I stood up and hobbled over to the office door. "Be seeing you," I said, and stepped outside.

I felt a cold fury wash over me as I climbed the stairway to the entrance of the club. At the top, I pushed through the double doors and grabbed Jack Hartford by the elbow before he had a chance to turn around. "Come on," I said, "you're going with me."

Hartford half turned and pulled back his arm. "Wait, Mr. Lane. I can't go anywhere now. I'm on duty."

"Shut up, Jack. You don't understand. Angela Hawkins is sitting in that office drinking single-malt scotch from a cut-glass tumbler."

Hartford blinked at me. "You're talking crazy, Mr. Lane. What does that mean?"

"I'll tell you what it means. It means that Angela Hawkins drinks scotch and likes it. It means she didn't send Scooter out of the office to get a gin and tonic the night of the shooting—she sent him out to get killed. So quit flapping your gums and come along."

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"Where we going?"
"We're going to get revenge—two platefuls of it."

Less than one hour later I was standing in the dank Chinatown alley behind the Red Dragon. Balanced on one shoulder was a 38-inch baseball bat. On the ground beside me was a large wine bottle with a piece of cloth torn from my shirttail shoved down the neck. The bottle was filled with gasoline, not fermented grape juice.

Jack Hartford sat in the driver's seat of my Lincoln at the mouth of the alley. The Lincoln was idling, and Jack had poked his head out the side window to look back at me with a worried expression.

I glanced down at my watch, and determined it had been more than sixty seconds since the Chinese boy I paid to yell "fire" had gone into the building. That was all the warning I was going to give them.

I nodded at Jack and stepped up to a large pebble-glass window that looked down into the basement. With methodical swings, I pounded the glass out of all four windowpanes and then threw the baseball bat down to the floor below. I pulled a kitchen match from my hat brim and set fire to the cloth wick of the bottle. It caught instantly and burned with a fat, greasy flame.

Standing back from the window, I lobbed the bottle in underhanded. There was a loud whoosh, and light and flame filled the basement the way a flash flood fills a gully. The fire spread quickly to wooden crates and burlap sacks stored in the room, and soon billows of black smoke were rolling out of the building.

I trotted back to the Lincoln and levered myself into the passenger seat. After pulling the door closed, I slumped against the window and closed my eyes. The exertion had made me lightheaded and my ribs were smarting like they'd been jabbed with foot-long ice picks.

"Are you okay, Mr. Lane?" asked Jack Hartford.

"Go, Jack. Just go." I said without looking up.

Jack popped the clutch and we screeched out of the alley. As we pulled around the corner I opened my eyes and saw a crowd of excited Chinese standing in front of the building. Several were gesturing at the open front door, and I could see the first hint of smoke rising out of the entryway.

We drove to the Pacific Telephone and Telegraph Company station on Powell Street and double-parked in front. I slid out of the car and went into the building. I dropped my nickel at one of the phones and called Davenport 4040. There were two rings and then the line picked up. Someone said a word in Chinese. "Wan Jung," I growled into the mouthpiece, "I want to talk with Wan Jung."

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"Wan Jung busy now," said the someone. "She no able to talk."

"You tell her Vic Lane is calling, and it's an emergency. She'll want to talk. Just tell her Vic Lane—got it?"

"Vic Lane, okay."

I waited a moment, and then Wan Jung's cultured voice came on the line: "How did you obtain the number for my residence, Mr. Lane?"

"Two weeks in a hospital bed gives a man time for plenty of things."

"Just so. What a pity that you did not use the time to acquire the wisdom not to interfere in my affairs."

"So you've already heard, then."

"I have not heard anything, Mr. Lane. I was merely referring to this most unwelcome telephone conversation. You have more misery you wish to inflict upon me?"

I laughed maliciously. "We haven't even started. I'm calling for Angela Hawkins—Scooter Hawkins's widow. She says to tell you that the Red Dragon is choking on its own fire this afternoon. And when the Red Dragon is dead, you will be next."

There was a sharp intake of breath. "You are a madman. I had nothing to do with the raid on her husband's club."

"Goodbye, Beautiful Countenance. I wonder if they'll call you that when you are lying in a pine box."

I set the receiver back on its prong and stared straight at the telephone, not seeing it. Then I went back outside to the car.

We got on the Coast Highway and drove south towards Half Moon Bay. For once, Jack didn't have any questions and we rode in silence all the way back to Scooter's club. It was dark by the time we got there, the parking lot already filling with autos. I directed Jack to pull up on a grassy knoll overlooking the gambling house.

We sat in the car smoking cigarettes and taking pulls from a whiskey bottle. We sat in the car for over two hours, and not a word passed between us.

Finally they came.

They came in two paneled trucks that skidded into the parking lot, raising clouds of dust that swirled in the light of their headlamps. There were close to fifty men, all dressed in black pajamas, carrying torches and short-handled axes. They tumbled out of the trucks and encircled the building.

A group of them charged the front entrance, downing Jack's replacement with a single blow. They set to work on the double doors with their axes, reducing them quickly to splinters. I heard the first shot then, and one Chinaman fell. The rest of the group swarmed into the opening and disappeared down the stairway.

The men on the perimeter of the building had not been idle. Here and there, tongues of flames licked at the walls of the

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wooden barn, and soon the northwest corner of the building was engulfed in fire.

I heard more gunfire, then women's screams and the harsh yelling of men, in both Chinese and English. Customers of the gambling house began boiling out of the building. Some ran to their autos and drove off in a panic; others crouched behind their vehicles, staring in dumb amazement.

Like clots of oil in water pumped from a bilge, the flow of people from the building darkened as the men in black pajamas returned from inside. In their midst was a woman: a dark woman with short black hair, a tailored suit, and a slender figure. Her voice rose in incoherent shrieks as the Chinese dragged her along the ground by her hair to one of the waiting trucks. While she thrashed and kicked like an injured animal, a dozen pair of hands lifted her high into the air and passed her into the back. Her last shriek died abruptly as she merged into the darkened interior. The woman was Angela Hawkins.

The Chinese at the perimeter of the building ran back to the trucks and piled inside with their cohorts. There was a grinding of gears, and then the trucks made wide, almost leisurely turns out of the parking lot and bounced onto the main highway. I watched as they rounded a broad curve in the road and disappeared from view. The raid had taken no more than five minutes, start to finish.

"I never thought I'd be so shamed by something I done," said a low voice beside me.

I turned to look at Jack Hartford, and saw the firelight from the building reflected in his eyes. "There was no other way, Jack," I said. "We had to avenge Scooter's death."

"Is that why we had to do it? Is that really why? I thought maybe we did it because you got beat up at the Red Dragon and Angela Hawkins and Chuck O'Toole made a fool of you. I thought that might've been it."

"Shut up, Jack," I said hotly. "You don't know what you're talking about."

"You might be right, Mr. Lane. Maybe I don't know what I'm talking about. But I do know I ain't staying with you no more. I got to get myself away and get clean of this thing. Best you and me call it quits right here."

Jack lumbered out of the car and began walking back towards the highway. I jumped out to follow, but stopped dead in my tracks as a loud crash sounded. The roof of Scooter Hawkins's gambling house was collapsing in a shower of sparks.

I breathed a deep breath and felt all my strength and will flow out of me. "So long, Scooter," I said aloud. "You deserved better than any of us gave you." ●

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Second Thought

by Percy Spurlark Parker

On the past thirty years Norma had never doubted the testimony she'd given that sent Jasper Dunn to the electric chair. She had been in her mid teens back then, but the event that precipitated the trial and the trial itself remained fresh in her mind.

It had been the first warm Saturday in May, a sure sign summer wasn't far off. Her mother had been making cakes for a church social and had run out of eggs. Norma was dispatched to Hoggin's General Store. She was about to enter when she heard gun shots, thought they were firecrackers at first. Then Jasper came rushing out, almost knocking her down as he ran across the street and around the corner.

There was no mistaking him. Jasper and her older sister Mindy had gone together for a year before Mindy got interested in Lenny Sachs.

Entering the store, she'd found Mr. Hoggin on the floor in front of his counter, a large revolver on the floor beside him in an ever-increasing pool of blood.

At the trial, Jasper freely admitted to being in the store, said he was there shoplifting a can of beer. He said he simply got scared when he heard the gunshots and Mr. Hoggin came stumbling from the back storage room.

Nothing was introduced at the trial to substantiate Jasper's claim of Hoggin being shot in the storage room. In fact, the state's attorney surmised Jasper was forcing Hoggin into the storage room when he balked and Jasper shot him.

The murder weapon was one of two guns Hoggin kept in the store for protection. There were no legible prints on the gun and no eyewitness to the actual shooting, thus on her testimony more

Percy Spurlark Parker is one of a small group of *EQMM* writers who seem to prefer the short story to the novel. About a dozen of his stories have appeared in *EQMM* and our sister publication *AHMM* over the years. His latest letter to *EQMM* says that he is once again at work on a novel, however, so it may be some time before we see another Parker short story.

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than anything else Jasper was sent to his death.

It wasn't until last evening that she thought perhaps a mistake had been made. It was quite a concession for her, admitting the possibility of a mistake, even if she only admitted it to herself. It wasn't that Norma considered herself perfect by any means, she had just been so certain of Jasper's guilt.

But last night at dinner, Thomas, youngest son, first-year law student, had planted the doubt in her mind.

"It could've been Hoggin's nephew, Spencer," he'd said, taking up a forkful of pot roast. "As Hoggin's only living relative, he inherited the business. And it was rumored they didn't get along."

"Honestly now, Thomas, how can you say such things?"

"Research, Mom." Thomas brushed back a lock of auburn hair from his forehead. "We examine old and new trials all the time at school. I couldn't let the one you were involved in get by me."

"My son the lawyer," Brad said, with a shrug of his hefty shoulders.

"My brother the dork," Anna chimed in.

Norma joined in the laughter, but the doubt had begun to creep in. Thomas had always been a studious child, much more than her other two children. Brad Junior was married and worked as a city garbage collector like his father. Anna was a teller at the local bank, and engaged to one of the branch managers. Thomas was the one Norma considered the smartest of the lot. If he thought a wrong had been done, perhaps it had.

It had taken forever for her to get to sleep last night. Brad had had a particularly hard day and he was out as soon as his head hit the pillow. But she couldn't get Spencer and Hoggin out of her head.

What did she know about them?

Hoggin had never been married, and at the time of his death had a reputation of being somewhat of a ladies' man. There had been a number of women mourners at his funeral. As for Spencer, he was nineteen or twenty back then. He'd been living with his uncle for about three years, moving in after his parents, Hoggin's sister and her husband, died in an auto accident. She had never known Spencer personally, nor did she recall any mention of bad feelings between him and his uncle at the trial. Yet Thomas had said there had been.

There was one thing certain, however. Spencer was a better businessman than his uncle had been. A second store was opened a year after Hoggin's death. Another had opened just last month. Norma had seen the notices of the grand opening in the papers and on TV. They were up to a chain of ten now, and known as Spencer's Marketplace.

Had she actually sent an innocent man to his death? That morning, when everyone else was off to work or school and she had the house to herself, it was still the uppermost question in her mind.

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The doubt had become overwhelming; she had to know for sure. But how? She could think of only one way.

The offices of Spencer's Marketplace were on the top two floors of the Banker's Building downtown on Main. Norma started to turn around and go back home a half-dozen times, but she knew there were no answers there.

"Yes?" The receptionist was a pert brunette with dainty features.

"I'd like to see Mr. Spencer, please."

"Do you have an appointment?"

"No. But I'm sure he'll see me. Tell him it's Norma Brenigar, he'll remember me as Norma Tennsen."

The receptionist's dainty features scrunched for a second or two, then smoothed as she asked Norma to have a seat while she checked with Mr. Spencer.

The frown was more pronounced as she led Norma to Spencer's office. It was as though a person just couldn't walk in and get to see Spencer right off.

"Please, come in," Spencer said, standing behind his desk, hand extended. Bits and pieces of what he looked like at the trial came back to her. He'd seemed fit, his dark hair brushed straight back. His eyebrows were thick but not bushy. His face lean but not thin. He was quite a contrast now. He wasn't that much older than she was, but he hadn't aged well at all. He was almost completely bald, a few gray strands clung to his temples. There were deep permanent burrows across his forehead, wrinkled bags under his eyes, and he stood a might stoop-shouldered, as if there was something wrong with his neck.

They shook hands, his grip as feeble as he looked. "Please, have a seat," he said, offering either of the two leather chairs that sat before his desk.

She settled into the chair on her right, noticing there were no family pictures on his desk, nor was he wearing a wedding ring. He'd made a success with the business, but apparently it had been a solitary journey. "Mr. Spencer, I . . ."

"I know." He nodded. "Your son has got you convinced I'm a murderer."

She was completely taken aback. "He's gotten me more confused than anything. But how did you know?"

"Some of the people he's interviewed have been in touch with me. I have a certain amount of power in this city, Mrs. Brenigar. People want to look out for my best interest, do me favors. I didn't think too much would be made of your son's inquiries. Now I'm not sure."

"That's where I am, Mr. Spencer. I'm not sure if I did the right thing all those years ago."

"Do you think I killed my uncle?" he asked, somewhat wide-eyed.

"I wish I knew for sure," she replied, surprising herself with how

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matter-of-fact she was being. But then, her self-confidence was coming easy in the face of how awful he looked. How could she be nervous confronting someone as frail and wasted away as he was? She had been somewhat of a tomboy in her youth. But even without that background, if something physical erupted, in his current state, she felt she could defend herself with ease.

"Tell me. Just what did you hope to accomplish by coming here?"

It was a question that Norma had asked herself over and over. "Peace of mind, perhaps," she finally said.

"Should I confess to killing my uncle and letting poor Jasper take the blame? Would that make you feel better?"

"Not if you didn't do it."

"I see. What if I told you my uncle and I had had enough of each other. We'd bumped heads once too often and he was about to kick me out?"

"Is that the truth?"

"Maybe, maybe not. How would you know? I could just as easily say he was going to make me a full partner in the business. Would that convince you that I didn't do it?"

"Can you prove you didn't?"

"Can you prove I did? You were there. Did you see me? Did you see anyone else there except Jasper?" Spencer's body may have been frail, but his mind was sharp.

"No, but . . ."

"The answer is no, Mrs. Brenigar. No, you did not see me. No, I did not kill my uncle." Spencer leaned back in his chair and his stooped shoulders heaved slightly in a sigh. "I've often wished I had been there. Maybe my uncle would still be alive today."

She felt more embarrassed than anything else now. Why she'd let Thomas's theory get her all worked up she didn't know. Hoggin and Jasper were long gone. She should've let the past stay in the past.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Spencer. I owe you an apology. Coming here was a mistake."

She got up quickly, heading for the door. God, she wished Thomas had never dug into the old trial, wished she'd had enough sense to pass it off as wild speculation. She turned back before leaving to say she was sorry once more, and saw the smile.

It was nothing close to an expression of good will. It was an evil, twisted creation that matched every wrinkle in his face, broadening his mouth, narrowing his eyes. A sinister smile of victory that sent a chill through her.

She charged back to the desk. "You did it. You killed your uncle. Thomas was right all along."

Spencer's narrow-eyed stare remained, his tone matching its harshness. "I'm warning you. Put an end to this now."

"Or what? You'll kill me like you killed your uncle?"

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"I don't need to kill anybody," Spencer shouted. He was beginning to get a might red in the face. "I've got real lawyers on my payroll."

"You won't shut me up now that I know the truth. I don't care how many lawyers you've got. You killed your uncle. You've gotten away with it long enough."

Tiny veins were beginning to show at the sides of his temples. "You're in for a lot of trouble, messing with me." He was breathing heavier, his face redder.

"We'll see who causes who the most trouble," Norma shouted back. "You may never go to jail for this, but your business won't be the same once the newspapers get my story. And I bet all those old friends of yours will start disappearing, too."

"Don't try it." There was a quiver in his voice. His breath was coming in great heaves; he pointed a shaky finger at her. "So help me, I'll get you if you do."

She didn't tell anyone she'd gone to see Spencer. She'd started to tell her husband when he came home, but she just couldn't frame the right words in her mind. Besides, after all the shouting was over, she knew Spencer was right. He would have an army of lawyers on her. If she took it any further, without any real proof he'd killed his uncle, she would only be causing herself and her family a lot of trouble.

Yet she knew with more certainty than she'd ever known anything before that Spencer was guilty. Sending Jasper to his death was something she was going to have to find a way to live with.

She was in the middle of cooking dinner when Thomas came into the kitchen.

"Guess what? Spencer's dead. He rear-ended a semi on the way home. Police are just guessing, but they think it was a heart attack."

Norma felt fifty pounds lighter; it was as if she was about to start floating. Had all the shouting in Spencer's office helped to bring on the attack? Had she helped right a wrong? She felt sure she had; although she couldn't take credit publicly, she had the satisfaction of knowing herself what she had done.

"It took awhile, but he finally paid for his crime," she said.

"What?" Thomas looked up from the pot he was inspecting on the stove. "Oh, the murder. Well, I've had a second thought on that, Mom. One of the other guys in class came up with a new theory. Valerie Krantz. She was one of Hoggin's lady friends. Left town right after the murder. She died over in Cedarsburg eight months later in childbirth. There was no father's name on the birth certificate. Hoggin could've got her pregnant, refused to marry her, and she shot him out of love, hate, or a combination thereof. Right now, she's our best possible suspect. Mom? Mom . . . are you all right? Why are you looking like that?" ●

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NEXT ISSUE...

Virgo in Sapphires
BY MARGARET MARON

Leopold at Bouchercon
BY EDWARD D. HOCH

The Problem of Stateroom 10
BY PETER LOVESEY

The Nerve
BY STEVE HAMILTON

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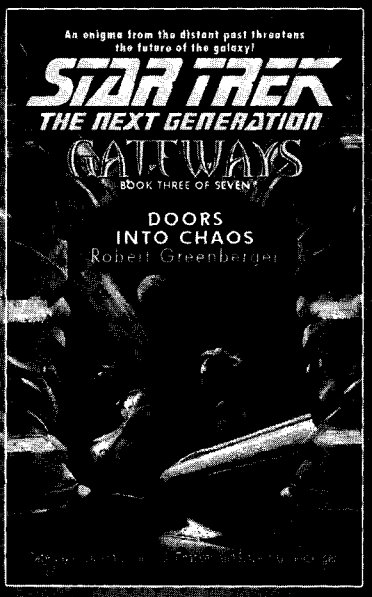

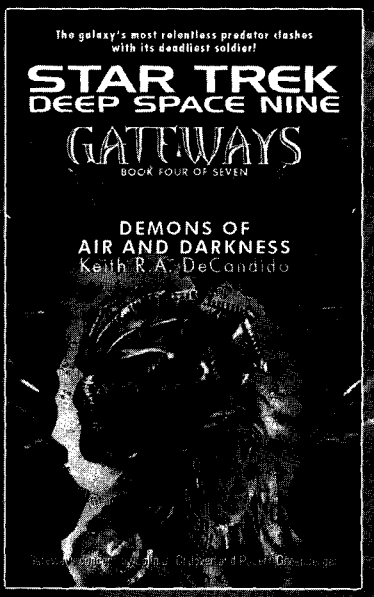
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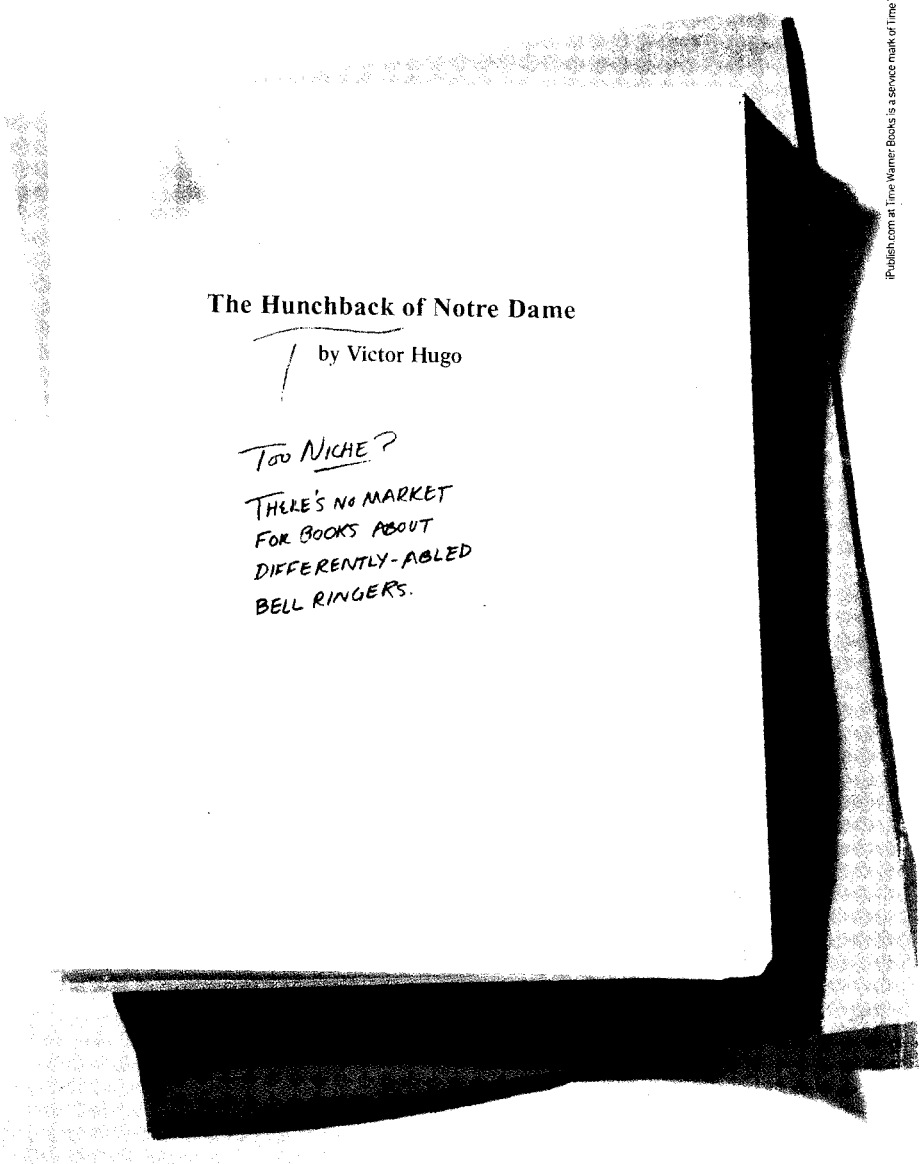

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